

## Female bladder health and pelvic floor exercises

Many women of all ages find that they develop bladder problems. One of the commonest complaints is the need to pass water very frequently (frequency) and without much warning (urgency), and sometimes a leakage of urine may occur (urge incontinence). There can also be leakage of urine during physical activity or during coughing or sneezing; this is stress incontinence.

### What is normal?

The kidneys are continuously filtering blood to produce urine which is stored in the bladder. The bladder will hold 400-500mls of urine, and an urge to pass urine is normally felt when the bladder is half full, thus giving time to reach the toilet. For various reasons, this message may become blurred or your bladder may contract to empty without warning, not allowing time to reach the toilet.

Keeping a fluid input-output chart is a useful tool to use and should be completed over a full 24 hour period for 3 days. A chart is provided for you to use at the back of this pack. The chart will show how much fluid you are drinking, how often, and how much you are passing each time you pass urine. The chart will also show often leakage is occurring. It will help to identify any triggers to your symptoms, guiding management and treatment. Going to the toilet up to 8 times in 24 hours, with one of these occurring at night is considered normal.

There are several strategies that can be employed to control symptoms of urgency and frequency.

### Fluid Management

A fluid intake of 1.5 – 2 litres is recommended. This is approximately 5-7 mugs.

Caffeine tends to act as an irritant to the bladder, it is recommended that caffeine free products are tried which are widely available, or substitute caffeinated drinks with water or fruit

squashes. Caffeine is found in tea, coffee, chocolate, high-energy drinks like Red Bull and Lucozade, Coca-cola and cocoa. If you drink large quantities of caffeinated drinks you should cut down gradually over a fortnight to reduce withdrawal effects.

Large volumes of fluid within a short period of time and fizzy drinks can cause rapid filling of the bladder leading to frequency and urgency. Drinks should be spaced evenly through the day.

If you cut down on fluids to try to control frequency, this means urine will become more concentrated and will irritate the bladder more. You will also be more prone to urine tract infections and constipation, both of which will irritate bladder symptoms.

Ideally urine should be a light straw colour. Very dark and strong smelling urine may mean it is too concentrated, and you should drink a bit more. If urine is pale with no smell, then you may be drinking too much. During hot weather, air travel, after exercising and during sickness you will need to drink more.

The table below indicates some of the fluids and foods which can irritate the bladder.

Good	Possible irritants
Water Decaffeinated drinks Squashes and cordials	Caffeinated drinks Fizzy drinks Grapefruit juice Spicy foods Alcohol Stronger brands of tea and coffee contain more caffeine and tannins

Cranberry juice should be limited to 400mls a day, and should be avoided if you have been diagnosed with interstitial cystitis or prescribed Warfarin.

## Drug Management

A number of medications can be prescribed by your GP to help control urgency and urge incontinence. You can discuss these with your GP.

Taking a prescribed diuretic (water tablet) will cause you to go to the toilet more frequently than normal a few hours after you have taken it. It is important for your health that you continue to take prescribed medications, so if you find it is causing you great difficulty you should consult your GP.

A number of common drugs and remedies can also contribute to bladder symptoms. You should seek advice from your Pharmacist, GP or Continence Nurse.

## Bad Habits

- Going to the toilet 'just-in-case'
- Straining to empty your bladder
- Hovering over the toilet seat

## Good tips

- For good hygiene, always wipe from front to back
- Give your bladder time to empty properly. Make sure you have fully emptied by leaning forwards towards the end of emptying. Then wait a few seconds and try to empty again.
- If you are troubled by getting up to empty your bladder during the night, do not drink directly before you go to bed. If you wake up thirsty during the night, have a few sips of water.

## Bladder retraining

This is a process whereby you train your bladder to hold a greater volume of urine.

Taking information from the fluid input-output chart you have completed, a continence nurse can advise you on retraining using the best method for you.

## Deferment techniques – helping you to hold on

Rushing to the toilet will not help.

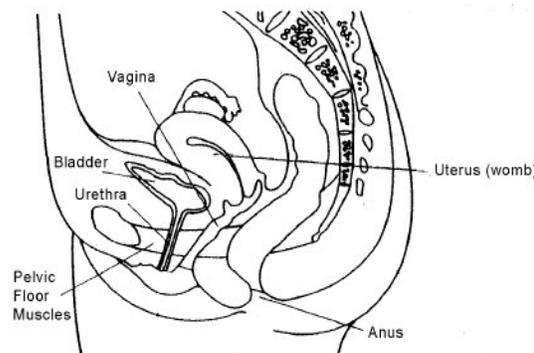
You can use your pelvic floor muscles to help calm your bladder when the feeling of urgency develops so you will be able to hold on for longer.

Sitting or standing still will help you to concentrate on tightening your pelvic floor muscles.

## Pelvic floor exercises

### Your pelvic floor muscles

The pelvic floor muscles form a hammock underneath your pelvis to provide support and control the bladder and bowel. The muscles attach to the pubic bone at the front, then span backwards to the coccyx (tailbone) behind. The openings to your bladder, your birth canal (vagina) and your bowel all pass through the pelvic floor. The muscles also contribute to sexual satisfaction.



### What does the pelvic floor do?

- It supports your pelvic organs and abdominal contents, especially when standing or on exertion.
- It supports the bladder to help stop leaking. The muscles need to work gently at all times and be able to work harder when you cough and sneeze to avoid leaking. When muscles are not working effectively you may suffer from urinary incontinence or urgency.

- It used to control wind and for 'holding on' with your bowels.
- It has an important sexual function, helping to increase sexual awareness for you and for your partner during sexual intercourse.

### **Why should I exercise my pelvic floor muscles?**

The pelvic floor muscles are affected by hormonal changes and may be damaged as a result of childbirth, pelvic surgery, persistent heavy straining due to constipation, a chronic cough, repetitive heavy lifting and from being overweight.

It is important to maintain the strength of these muscles to prevent problems occurring, or to increase the strength when problems do occur.

Pelvic floor muscles need to be exercised just as much as any other weak or damaged muscles. The exercise programme will help to maintain and /or improve their strength.

An individual exercise programme is important. If you do not feel that this programme suits you or helps you, then it is important for you to be assessed individually. You can discuss this when you come to clinic.

### **The Exercise Programme**

A pelvic floor contraction is performed by closing and drawing up you front and back passages. Imagine you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and at the same time try to stop the flow of urine. The feeling is one of 'squeeze and lift'.

You can do this lying, sitting or standing. You can feel the correct muscles working by placing your index finger or thumb into the vagina.

Start gently and stop if it hurts.

#### **DON'T**

- Pull in your tummy muscles excessively
- Squeeze your legs together
- Tighten your buttocks

**You should aim to perform at least 8 contractions of the muscles, 3 times during the day, everyday.**

Muscles only develop when you challenge them to work harder than normal. This will be different for everyone. There are many other ways of exercising the pelvic floor muscles. The continence clinic will be able to assist you in the best way of exercising your pelvic floor muscles.

Develop a habit of bracing you pelvic floor muscles gently during everyday activities (lifting, carrying and during housework) and particularly during any task which might challenge the bladder or put pressure through the pelvis.

You may have heard of an exercise using the pelvic floor muscles to stop and start the flow of urine. This is no longer recommended as it may interfere with normal bladder emptying.

**Tips for a healthy pelvic floor**

To relieve the load on your pelvic floor, aim for an acceptable weight for your height and build. Being overweight [a BMI over 29] has been proven to have a negative impact on symptoms of stress incontinence and prolapse. There are many ways of losing weight, your GP should be able to guide you as to the most suitable method for you.

Lifting puts extra strain on the pelvic floor. If you do need to lift a heavy object remember to tighten your pelvic floor before you lift, and hold it tight until you have lowered the load. Think especially about small children, shopping bags and gardening.

Smoking - Research suggests that smokers are more likely to experience urinary incontinence and this is due to the excessive strain that repetitive coughing puts on the pelvic floor. If you do smoke and would like support to stop smoking contact:  
CAMQUIT – Cambridgeshire Stopping Smoking Service – 0800 018 4304  
Or visit [www.camquit.nhs.uk](http://www.camquit.nhs.uk). NHS Smoking helpline 0800 169 0169

## Avoiding Constipation

Many people find symptoms are worse if they are constipated. A full bowel will irritate the bladder.

- To keep a healthy bowel, eat a balanced diet, which includes both soluble fibre (oats, barley, berries and fruit) and insoluble fibre (wheat-based foods, cereal, vegetables and nuts).
- Eat regular meals.
- You should go to the toilet to empty your bowel when you feel the need, as delaying may lead to constipation.
- Adequate fluid intake of 1.5-2 litres will also help.

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For further advice and information contact:  
Bladder and Bowel Foundation  
0845 345 0165  
[www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org.uk](http://www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org.uk)

When you attend for your appointment, you should bring with you:

1. Your completed fluid input-output chart
2. Your patient questionnaires (this will help the clinic to determine your needs and is also used to measure your progress)