

Bladder Care In Women and Men: How to keep your bladder healthy



Your bladder

The bladder is an organ in your body that stores and empties urine. Your kidneys filter blood to produce urine which is then stored in the bladder. The bladder is a muscular bag that expands as it fills with urine.

The Basics

- The average person produces about 1-1.5 litres of urine every day
- An adult should need to empty their bladder around 4-6 times a day - but varies from person to person
- A healthy bladder should be able to hold up to 500ml of urine before it needs to be emptied
- A healthy bladder should never leak urine.

Why may I have bladder issues?

The first sensation that you will need to pass urine usually happens when your bladder is half full and sends a signal to your brain. The brain can usually control these signals until there is an opportunity to get to the toilet. Then the bladder will contract and empty when you are ready.

Sometimes the bladder ignores this message and begins to squeeze when you do not want it to. This may cause symptoms of what is called an “*overactive bladder*”.

Symptoms may be:

- Urgency (a strong desire to go to the toilet quickly, which may lead to leakage)
- Frequency (visiting the toilet more often)
- Nocturia (getting up during the night to empty your bladder).

The bladder is supported by the pelvic floor muscles. As long as the pelvic floor muscles work well, they will stop urine escaping when you cough, jump or sneeze. If the muscles are not supportive enough, you may have what is called “*stress incontinence*”.

Symptoms may be:

- Leakage of urine with activities such as jumping, lifting, running
- Leakage of urine when coughing or sneezing

More information on this and other common bladder problems is on the NHS Inform website:

www.nhsinform.co.uk/health-library/articles/i/incontinence-urinary/introduction

Drinking and Fluid Intake

Drinks that irritate the bladder:	Drinks that do not irritate the bladder:
• Caffeinated drinks - tea, coffee, green tea, many fizzy juices	• Water
• Alcohol	• Milk and milkshakes
• Fizzy/carbonated drinks	• Decaffeinated tea and coffee
• Hot Chocolate	• Fruit and herbal teas
• Citrus fruit juices	• Diluted fruit juice

A healthy fluid intake is about 1.5 litres of water / fluid a day (about 6 - 8 mugs or glasses). It is important to drink enough fluid. It helps to avoid drinks that can irritate the bladder (as above) but do not cut down your fluid intake because of your bladder problems. If you do not drink enough, your urine will become very concentrated and dark-looking. This may make your bladder symptoms worse. If you drink excessively and your urine is watered down, you will need to empty your bladder more often.

If you are getting up frequently during the night to empty your bladder, it may help to change the amount you drink in the evening and at night. For example, only drink water after 6pm and do not drink anything in the 2 hours before you go to bed.

You may have been asked to fill in a bladder diary before coming along to a clinic – this information is very helpful to help guide you on how to adjust your fluid intake and will also help to diagnose any problems with your bladder.

General Health

Weight

Being overweight puts additional strain on your pelvic floor muscle support and therefore may worsen stress incontinence, i.e. leaking urine on coughing, running, etc. Weight loss and regular exercise may improve bladder symptoms.

Smoking

Nicotine irritates overactive bladders. In addition, smoking leads to more coughing, which puts a strain on your pelvic floor muscles and may worsen leakage. Smoking also increases the risk of bladder cancer.

Constipation

It is important to have regular bowel movements. If you tend to be constipated and have to strain to pass stools, this may weaken your pelvic floor muscles and worsen bladder symptoms. A constipated bowel may also put pressure on your bladder and make overactive bladder symptoms worse. A healthy diet and drinking enough water will help.

Diabetes

Diabetes may affect how often you go to the toilet. Poorly controlled diabetes (high blood sugars) may make you need to go to the toilet more as it affects the function of your kidneys (the filters that produce urine before it reaches your bladder). If you have diabetes and are concerned that this may be affecting your bladder symptoms, we would advise you to see your GP.

Certain medications

Medications may affect your bladder symptoms, for example, tablets used to treat

- high blood pressure
- depression
- allergies

Often these medicines are essential and the effects of not taking them may be much more serious than the effect they might be having on your bladder. This may be discussed with your GP. If you are coming to a hospital appointment about your bladder, please bring an up-to-date list of your medications with you.

Previous pregnancies (women only)

The risk of bladder symptoms is increased when you have had children. Even if you had your children by caesarean section, it is still known to have an effect on the bladder. To minimise the risk of bladder symptoms, it is helpful to do pelvic floor exercises throughout your life (see page 4 on how to do them).

Pelvic Floor Exercises

The "**Pelvic Floor**" is the group of muscles that play a vital role in supporting the contents of the pelvis, including the bladder and bowel (in woman also the womb and the vagina). People often overlook the health of their pelvic floor - until it is not working properly.

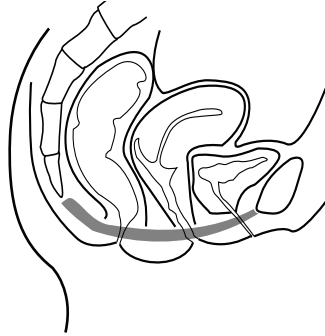


Figure1. Side view of female pelvic floor

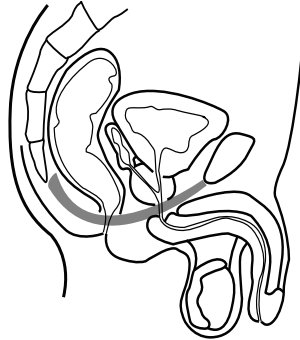


Figure 2. Side view of male pelvic floor

When a muscle is not exercised, it weakens through lack of use. The pelvic floor muscles are no exception. When the pelvic floor muscles are weakened, this has an effect on the bladder and bowel symptoms. Most common symptoms are stress incontinence (leaking of urine on coughing / sneezing / running / jumping etc) and urgency (needing to get to the toilet quickly).

The pelvic floor may also be weakened during childbirth. Other factors that might contribute to weak pelvic floor muscles are constipation, chronic cough, increased body weight and the menopause.

A weak pelvic floor may contribute to symptoms of prolapse in women. This is when the unsupported pelvic organs (womb, bladder or bowel), may begin to '*prolapse*' out of their normal positions and bulge into the vagina.

If you see your doctor for an assessment of bladder or prolapse symptoms, they will check the strength of these muscles. If they find you have some of these issues, they will often recommend supervised pelvic floor muscle training with one of our specialist physiotherapists.

How to do Pelvic Floor Exercises

To begin with, choose somewhere quiet so that you can concentrate. Lie on your back with your knees bent and slightly apart with your feet resting on the bed / floor. Once you feel confident that you can feel these muscles working in a lying position, the exercises can be done sitting and standing and at any time of the day.

Step one (working the slow part of the muscles)

Slowly tighten the muscles around your back passage as if you are trying to stop / slow the passage of wind. At the same time, tighten the muscles at the front as if you are trying to stop / slow the passage of urine. You should feel a squeeze and a lift inside.

Try to hold this squeeze and lift for as long as you can up to a count of 10. Let the muscles rest for four seconds and then repeat. Repeat the contraction as many times as you can up to 10 times.

Step two (working the fast part of the muscles)

Do the same exercise but squeeze and lift quickly and let go immediately. This will help your muscles to react quickly when you cough, sneeze, laugh, etc. Do as many as you can up to 10.

- Try to fit step one and two into your daily activities 3 -5 times daily
- Like all exercise programmes, it takes time to see results and it is important to stick with it
- **Avoid** holding your breath, squeezing your legs together or tightening your buttock muscles.

You'll have the most benefit if you continue to do these exercises regularly

Tips about going to the toilet

Double voiding

Double voiding will help you empty your bladder properly. Don't rush when you are passing urine. Allow the flow to come away completely. Then lean forward and backwards. You can even stand up and sit down again. This is called double voiding, and it will ensure that you empty your bladder completely.

Bladder training

Bladder training is a way of trying to increase the time that passes between needing to pass urine. The aim is to slowly increase the length of time between needing to go.

Don't go to the toilet if you don't need to. Going 'just in case' may make bladder symptoms worse, as the bladder gets used to holding less urine.

When you get the urge to go, try to "hold on". At first, delay going to the toilet for just a few minutes, then try to gradually increase this to 20 minutes, then up to 1 - 2 hours.

This will feel difficult at first. When trying to hold on it might be useful to:

- sit on a hard chair
- do something distracting
- do some pelvic floor exercises
- curl your toes.

Over time, your bladder will learn to relax and this will mean that you will need to go to the toilet less often. Ideally, you should be able to hold on for at least 3 - 4 hours.

Before, during and after bladder training, it is useful to fill in bladder charts, so you can monitor how often you are going to the toilet.

Stress response

Everyone knows how often they need to go to the toilet before an exam, a job interview, or any major life event. Any stress, worry, anxiety or panic will have an effect on your bladder. That does not mean there is anything wrong with the bladder. This is the stress response: it makes your bladder give you stronger signals to empty it more.

This will happen with any worry or panic, including worrying about having an accident, or not being near a toilet. The key is to stay calm and tell the bladder to “wait.” The signal is very likely to pass! Then you can walk calmly to the toilet when the signal has passed. Never try to run with a signal (“key in the door syndrome”), as the panic makes us more likely to leak.

Instead: Stop, Breathe, Wait, Go Calmly

How can you reduce the risk of urine infections

- Always wipe from front to back – this will help to reduce the risk of bacteria transferring from the back passage and causing infections
- Having a good fluid intake is also important to minimise the risk of infection
- It may be helpful to use un-perfumed soaps and toiletries when washing the area
- Avoid tight pants and clothes, especially those made of artificial fibres like polyester. Cotton pants may be preferable
- Emptying your bladder before and after sex may also reduce the risk of infections
- Ensure that you empty your bladder properly. If there is any urine left in your bladder after you have emptied it, this will increase the risk of infection. (See page 6 on double-voiding).

References

- The management of urinary incontinence in women: NICE September 2013
Bladder and Bowel Foundation
- www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org
- Bladder training leaflet: Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust. March 2013.
- <https://nhsscotlandphotolibrary.org>

