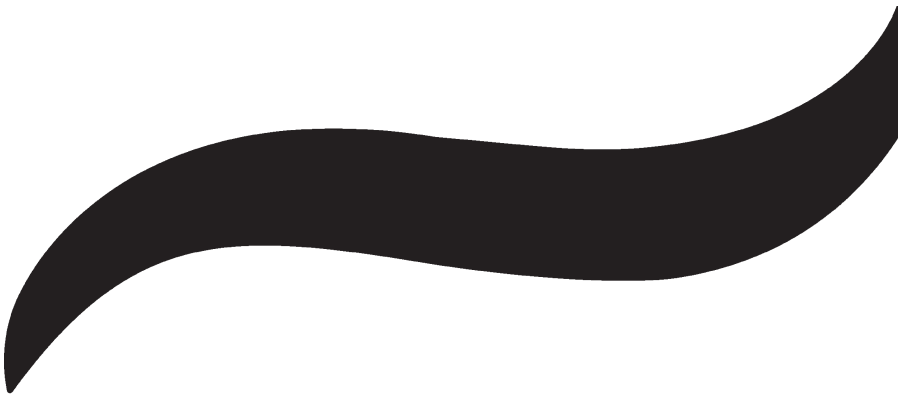




# How to help an overactive bladder

Information for patients  
Physiotherapy Department



## **NORMAL BLADDER FUNCTION**

Your bladder collects and stores urine (wee) until it is full and needs to be emptied. The feeling of needing to go to the toilet increases as the bladder fills, but you should be able to delay emptying your bladder until you reach a suitable time and place.

For most people the bladder needs to be emptied between 6-7 times a day, every 3-4 hours and for some once overnight.

# WHAT IS AN OVERACTIVE BLADDER

An overactive bladder is when a person gets a sudden urge and strong need to pass urine. This sensation can be difficult to put off, it can happen at any time during the day or night, and often without any warning.

Symptoms of an overactive bladder are:

## Urgency

The sudden need to pass urine, this gives you little or no time to get to the toilet.

## Urge incontinence

The urgent need to pass urine. It can mean that you start to leak urine before you reach the toilet.

## Frequency

The need to pass urine more than 8 times per day.

## Nocturia

The need to pass urine more than once during the night.

# TIPS TO HELP IMPROVE YOUR SYMPTOMS

## Healthy drinking habits

There are drinks you should avoid as they can irritate the bladder, and these include; caffeinated tea, coffee and green tea, fizzy drinks, drinks containing artificial sweetener (found in diet drinks) hot chocolate, alcohol, blackcurrant and fresh orange juice.

Drinks that do not irritate the bladder include water, milk, decaffeinated tea, decaffeinated coffee, fruit tea and diluted juice. Try to drink around 3 to 4 pints (1.5 - 2 litres) of liquid per day.

Try not to limit the amount of fluid you drink. Drinking too little makes your urine stronger which may irritate your bladder and make it want to empty more often. If you drink too much your body will produce more urine, especially if the drinks contain large amounts of caffeine.

You should reduce the amount of caffeine you drink slowly so you don't have any unpleasant withdrawal effects.

## BLADDER RETRAINING

The purpose of bladder retraining is to help you regain control of your bladder. This happens by gently stretching the bladder muscle so that it stays more relaxed as the bladder fills. Your bladder should become less irritable and less sensitive and you shouldn't need to go to the toilet as often. It also aims to reduce urine leaking out before you get to the toilet.

### Techniques to control urgency

Instead of rushing to the toilet as soon as you get the urge (strong need) to pass urine, it is important to try to hold on. If you find this difficult try using the technique below:

- ❖ Remain calm and try some slow deep breathing
- ❖ Sit on something firm, like the edge of the chair or the arm of a seat
- ❖ Try to tighten your pelvic floor muscles a few times. Please see page 9 for more information on pelvic floor exercises.
- ❖ Try to take your mind off feeling like you need to go to the toilet by doing your 9 times table in your head, or recite the alphabet backwards, or take 7 away from 100, then 93, then 86 and so on until you get to zero
- ❖ It should only take 15-20 seconds for the urge to pass, then you can slowly walk to the toilet

## **Increasing the times between visits to the toilet**

Set your target based on your usual pattern of going to the toilet. When you first start bladder retraining you might only be able to hold off for a few minutes longer when you feel the urge to go.

When you have managed that for a few days you could try holding off for slightly longer, aim for 5-10 minutes. It's important to keep trying as it could be a few days before you see any improvements.

The aim is for you to pass urine every 3-4 hours during the day.

## **Reducing visits to the toilet overnight**

As you get older your kidneys can produce more urine overnight.

If you notice your legs are swollen you can try putting them up in the afternoon or evening – you should put your legs on a cushion or the arm of the chair to make sure they are above the level of your heart. This will help to reduce the amount of fluid your body needs to get rid of overnight so you won't have to go to the toilet as often.

If you find that you need to use the toilet more than once a night it may be useful to have your last drink two or three hours before bed-time.

## OTHER HELPFUL TIPS

### Avoid constipation

If you're constipated you may find that your stools (poo) are hard and difficult to pass. Having a full bowel can put pressure on your bladder which can make it difficult to empty and you may feel the need to pass urine more often. Straining to open your bowels may stretch and weaken your pelvic floor muscles.

To help prevent constipation make sure that you:

- ❖ Try to drink around 3 to 4 pints (1.5 - 2 litres) of liquid per day
- ❖ Eat more fibre. You can do this by eating more fruit and vegetables, wholegrain cereals, porridge, wholemeal bread and pulses such as beans and lentils. Try to increase the fibre in your diet gradually over a few weeks (see also BDA – Fibre Food Facts link at the back of this leaflet).
- ❖ Increase your physical activity by moving about more and doing more exercise.
- ❖ Sitting on the toilet the right way will make it easier for you to empty your bowel and bladder. Sit with your feet up on a small footrest so that your knees are above your hips and lean forward. Rest your arms on your knees and relax your stomach. This is the best position to avoid straining.

If you're not usually constipated then you should speak to your doctor.



## **Lose weight**

Being overweight puts pressure on your pelvic floor muscles and losing even a small amount can help reduce your urine leakage. Aim for a healthy weight for your height.

## **Get a good night sleep**

One of the main reasons for getting up during the night to use the toilet is because of disturbed sleep. It is also worth having a look at your sleeping patterns.

## **Control chronic coughing**

If you have a chronic cough that lasts a long time this can stretch and weaken the pelvic floor and make leakage worse. Speaking to your GP for help to control your cough can reduce your leakage (see also the smoking cessation information at the back of this leaflet).

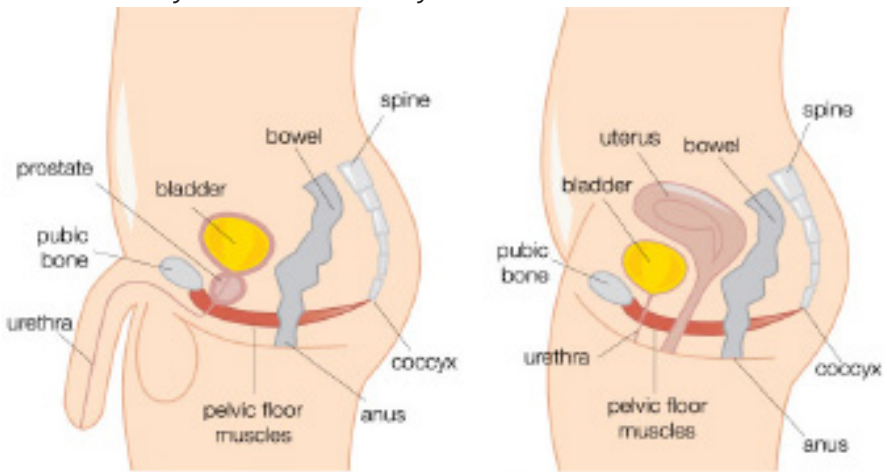
## **Review the medications you are taking**

Some medications can cause bladder and bowel symptoms or make them worse. It may be worthwhile discussing this with your GP.



## Pelvic Floor Exercises

Doing regular pelvic floor exercises will help by strengthening the muscles that you use to hold in your urine.



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You may find it easier to do these exercises in lying or sitting to start with.

Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing wind and pull up on your pelvic floor muscles inside your back passage. Try to pull the muscles upwards and forwards and imagine that you are also trying to stop yourself passing urine.

- ❖ Long squeeze exercises – try to tighten the muscles for up to 10 seconds. Repeat this exercise 10 times until the muscles get tired,
- ❖ Short, quick squeeze exercises – try to tighten the muscles quickly, then let them relax fully. Try to repeat this 10 times if you can.

Try not to:

- ❖ Squeeze your buttocks
- ❖ Squeeze your legs together
- ❖ Hold your breath

You may feel some tightening in your lower stomach - this is normal.

You should do these pelvic floor exercises at least 3 times per day. It may take a few weeks for you to notice some improvements but you should stick with it.

As your muscles improve and get stronger you can try to do your pelvic floor exercises when standing up.

It is important that you do not try to do these exercises when you are passing urine.

### Staying positive

Don't be discouraged by setbacks. You may find you have good days and not so good days when you are trying to develop better bladder control.

You may notice you have less control of your bladder:

- ❖ If you are tired, run down or have a cold
- ❖ If you are busy and have many things on your mind
- ❖ If you feel tense and anxious
- ❖ If it's cold, rainy or windy outside

Changing your habits to control your bladder take time and effort but stick with it!

## FURTHER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

- ❖ BDA - Fibre Food Facts:  
<https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/fibre.html>
- ❖ Smoking Cessation:  
Quit Your Way 0800 84 84 84  
<https://www.nhslanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk/services/quit-your-way/>
- ❖ NHS Lanarkshire Pelvic Floor Physiotherapy Service  
01698 366420

Clinics available at:

- ◆ University Hospital Wishaw  
50 Netherton Street  
Wishaw ML2 0DP
- ◆ University Hospital Monklands  
Monkscourt Avenue  
Airdrie ML6 0JS
- ◆ University Hospital Hairmyres  
218 Eaglesham Road  
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Pub. date:	December 2021
Review date:	December 2023
Issue No:	01
Department:	Physiotherapy
Clinical lead:	

PIL\_OVRBLD.21\_24753.L