

Stress incontinence

Information for patients



Normal bladder function

Your bladder normally stores urine that is produced by your kidneys. Your kidneys produce urine all the time and the amount of urine you produce depends on how much you drink, eat and sweat.

The bladder should act like a balloon that fills gradually. The outlet for the urine (the urethra) is normally kept closed. This is helped by the muscles beneath the bladder that sweep around the urethra (the pelvic floor muscles). As the bladder fills, the need to pass urine increases. In normal bladder function it is possible to wait until it is suitable and convenient to empty the bladder.

Your bladder should normally hold around 400-600mls (1 pint) of urine. Visits to the toilet should be around 6-8 times during the day and possibly once during the night. The amount of fluid you drink will affect how often you need to pass urine. For most people the average fluid intake should be approximately 1.5 - 2 litres a day (3 to 4 pints).

The bladder is made up of a muscle called the 'detrusor'. When this contracts (squeezes), the muscles in the urethra relax and your bladder will empty.

Normally it should be possible for you to 'hold on' if it is not convenient or appropriate to pass urine.

Complex nerve messages are sent between the brain, bladder and the pelvic floor muscles. This influences the sensation of your bladder filling and the use of the right muscles at the right time. To remain continent (dry) the muscles that make up your urethra and bladder neck (where your urethra joins your bladder) must be able to tighten under 'stress-related' conditions (e.g. when you cough, sneeze or exercise).

What is stress incontinence?

Stress incontinence is when you leak urine during activities which cause an increase in pressure in your abdomen (tummy). The pressure is increased on coughing, sneezing or exercise.

What causes it?

If your pelvic floor muscles are weak this can lead to an inadequate support of the bladder neck and urethra. This may result in you leaking urine when you exert yourself. Weakening of the pelvic floor muscles is common in women after childbirth. Other things like chronic constipation, the menopause and heavy or repeated lifting can affect them too. Persistent coughs and excess weight gain also put a strain on the pelvic floor.

How is it treated?

- **Physiotherapy**

This is most commonly the first line of treatment because research shows that symptoms will improve for 2 out of every 3 women. Treatment will include:

Lifestyle interventions

It is helpful to reduce the things in your life which put a strain on the pelvic floor muscles – like stopping smoking if it makes you cough, reducing your weight, or adjusting your diet to make sure you do not get constipated.

Pelvic floor exercises

Your pelvic floor is a group of muscles that plays a large part in keeping you continent. They act like a sling that supports your womb, bladder and bowel. Your physiotherapist will assess these muscles to ensure you are doing the correct movement. This may involve a vaginal examination so that the exercise program you are given is special to you. There is a separate leaflet on the detail of these exercises.

- **Surgery**

If the above treatments are not enough to sort out your problem (which research shows is the case in 1 out of every 3 women) you may be offered surgery. The surgeon will discuss this with you to tell you the most suitable type of operation for your particular problem. If you have certain medical conditions or if you would like to have any or further children, surgery may not be recommended.

How can I manage my incontinence?

You may find it necessary to use pads to control the leakage whilst you are having treatment. It is useful to use ones which are specially designed for urine as these are more absorbent. Pads are sometimes available on the NHS and you should talk to your district nurse or GP to find out about this.

Who to contact for advice

Beverly White and Tiana Howard
Urogynaecology Nurse Specialists

Tel: **01865 222 767**

Women's Health Physiotherapists

Tel: **01865 221 530**

Further help and information

Bladder and Bowel Foundation

SATRA Innovation Park
Rockingham Road
Kettering
Northants NN16 9JH

Tel: **0845 345 0165**

www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org

If you need an interpreter or need a document in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221473** or email **PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk**

Beverly White, Urogynaecology Nurse Specialist
Version 2, November 2012
Review November 2015
Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust
Oxford OX3 9DU
www.ouh.nhs.uk