Urinary Incontinence in Women

Millions of women have problems with the loss of bladder control resulting in urine leakage called urinary incontinence. It can range from a few drops of urine to a complete emptying of the bladder. Incontinence may last for days or weeks, or it can be a long term problem.

How the Bladder Works
Urine is stored in the bladder and passes through the urethra to leave the body. The bladder muscles relax as the bladder is filled with urine and the sphincter muscles around the urethra contract or stay tight to keep urine in. These functions reverse when you urinate – the bladder muscles contract and the sphincter muscles relax to release urine.

Why Incontinence Happens
Incontinence happens when the bladder muscles suddenly contract and/or and the sphincter muscles are not strong enough to hold back urine. This is caused by problems with these muscles or the nerves that control the muscles.

Twice as many women than men have urinary incontinence. This is mainly due to the female anatomy where space is shared with the uterus and vagina. Pregnancy and childbirth can weaken muscles in the pelvic floor, which can result in urine leakage. This often improves after the muscles have time to heal.

Women may also have incontinence problems after menopause. The decrease in the female hormone estrogen may weaken the tissue in the urethra.

Aging is also a factor. As you grow older, the muscles of the bladder and urinary tract can weaken just like other muscles in your body and this can lead to an increased chance of incontinence.

Both men and women can become incontinent from nerve damage related to diabetes, stroke, or a brain or spinal cord injury.
Other things that may affect bladder control include:

- Caffeine and alcohol
- Excess weight
- Medications
- Infection
- Constipation

Types of Incontinence

There are different types of incontinence and some people have more than one type.

- **Stress incontinence** is the most common type in women. Leaking happens when pressure is placed on the bladder from lifting, coughing, sneezing, or laughing.

- **Urge incontinence** is also called overactive bladder. Leakage occurs after you have a sudden, strong urge to urinate. It is often unexpected but may be related to things like feeling or hearing running water or drinking liquids.

- **Overflow incontinence** is less common in women and happens because the bladder doesn’t empty completely.

- **Functional incontinence** occurs in people with problems with thinking, moving, or speaking that prevent them from getting to the bathroom on time.

Seeing Your Doctor

Although you may feel uncomfortable discussing your symptoms, it is important to see your doctor in order to find the best treatment for you. Your doctor will do an exam, check your urine, and talk with you about your symptoms.

Other tests may be ordered such as:

- **Ultrasound** – Sound waves are used to make pictures of your bladder, urethra, and kidneys.

- **Cystoscopy** – A doctor inserts a thin tube connected to a tiny camera into your urethra to see the inside of your urethra and bladder.

- **Urodynamics** – A doctor places a thin tube called a catheter into your bladder, fills it with fluid, and measures the bladder pressure.

Treatments

Treatment options include things that you can do such as diet changes, managing fluids, losing weight, quitting smoking, Kegel exercises, and bladder retraining.

**Diet Changes**

Some food products can irritate the bladder and make incontinence worse. Try to avoid:

- Alcohol
- Coffee and tea
- Carbonated waters or sodas
- Citrus fruits or juices like orange juice or grapefruit juice
- Spicy foods

You may not have to stop these completely, but making changes may have an impact on your symptoms. You may be bothered more by some of these more than others. For some people the caffeine in coffee or soda is a problem, while for others even coffee and soda without caffeine causes symptoms. Try cutting out or cutting down certain items and track how your bladder responds.
Managing Fluids
Drinking large amounts of fluids increases how often you need to empty your bladder and how often you may have leakage. You should drink about eight cups or one half gallon of fluids each day. If you are in the heat or perspiring a lot, you may need to drink more. The important thing with fluids is to drink smaller amounts throughout the day.

Be careful not to drink too few fluids. Although you produce less urine, the urine is concentrated and can irritate your bladder. Drinking too few fluids can also lead to constipation, which can put more pressure on your bladder.

Losing Weight
If you are overweight, you may find that losing some weight can decrease the problem of incontinence. Talk with your doctor about the best approach for your weight loss efforts. Even small amounts of weight loss may be helpful.

Quitting Smoking
Nicotine irritates the bladder, so quitting smoking or the use of other tobacco products may also prove to be helpful.

Kegel Exercises
Kegel exercises are pelvic muscle strengthening exercises, which can improve bladder control. If your doctor recommends these, try doing them lying down at first.

1. Squeeze the muscles in your genital area as if you are trying to stop the flow of urine or holding back a bowel movement.

2. Squeeze just the pelvic muscles. Do not squeeze the muscles in your legs, belly or buttocks at the same time.

3. Squeeze and hold for 3 seconds and relax for 3 seconds. Repeat. Work up to doing 10 sets three times.

When your muscles get stronger and you feel more comfortable doing Kegel exercises, try doing them sitting and standing throughout the day. You can do them at any time such as when you’re waiting in line, waiting at a stop light, or while you’re sitting at a desk.

Kegel exercises work best when you are doing them properly. Talk with your nurse or doctor about getting help on how to do them.

Bladder Training
Bladder training can be helpful if you find yourself urinating often, at the slightest urge, or when you don’t even need to go in order to avoid an accident. When this is your regular pattern, your bladder starts sending “full” messages to your brain when it really isn’t full. It needs to be re-trained to send the full message accurately.

1. You will need to keep a diary. Write down each time you urinate for a few days. Use this to see the amount of time you usually have between bathroom visits.

2. Start by adding 15 minutes to your usual time. For example, if you urinate every 90 minutes on average, try going every 105 minutes. Write out a schedule to keep track.
3. Do your best to stick to your schedule. If you need to go sooner, don’t wait but start back on your schedule again.

If you have a strong, sudden urge to urinate, relax by taking deep breaths and contracting your pelvic muscles. Once you feel relaxed, calmly make your way to the bathroom if you still feel the urge.

With any of these measures – diet changes, losing weight, bladder training, or Kegel exercises – it takes time to see the results. If you stick with it, you’re likely to see improvements in your symptoms.

Other Treatments
There are other treatments for urinary incontinence. These include medications, biofeedback, nerve stimulation, injections, devices, and surgery. Not all of these may be options for you, but your doctor can explain what may help you.

Skin Care
The skin in the genital area is quite sensitive to moisture and can become irritated easily.

There are products to keep you dry and prevent the leakage of urine onto your clothing. Pads made for urine leakage come in a range of sizes and absorbency from panty-liner to a full undergarment depending upon how much protection is needed.

You will also need to gently wash and dry the area at least once a day. Use warm water and a mild, unscented soap. Then rinse with clear water and pat dry.

Check with your doctor or nurse about using special creams if you still have irritation. Don’t use powders or regular lotions. They may worsen irritation and lead to a greater chance of infection.

Resources
If you would like more information about incontinence:

National Association for Continence
www.nafc.org
800-252-3337

Simon Foundation for Continence
www.simonfoundation.org
800-237-4666

National Kidney and Urologic Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NKUDIC)

Talk with your doctor about your questions and concerns.