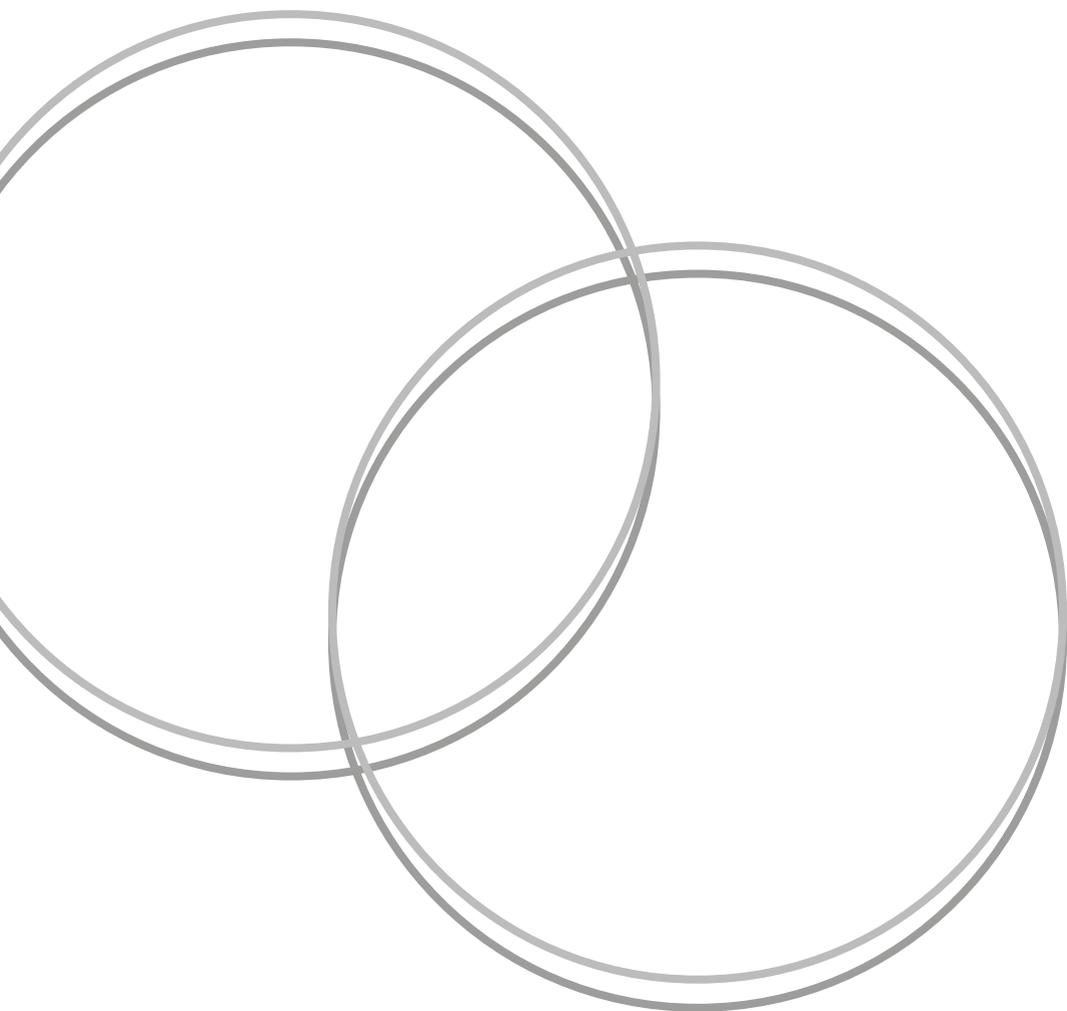




Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Stress Incontinence

Information for women



**Department of Urogynaecology,
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Normal bladder function

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

Your bladder should normally hold around 400 to 600mls (1 pint) of urine. Visits to the toilet should be around 7 to 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 2 litres (3 and 1/2 pints) a day.

The bladder should act like a balloon, which fills gradually. The outlet for the urine (the urethra) is normally kept closed. This is helped by the pelvic floor muscles beneath the bladder, which sweep around the urethra.

As the bladder fills, the need to pass urine increases. With a healthy bladder, it should be possible for you to 'hold on' until you find a convenient time to empty it.

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

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 dry (continent) the muscles that make up your urethra and bladder neck (where your urethra joins your bladder) must be able to tighten when put under pressure from activities such as coughing, sneezing or exercising.

What is stress incontinence?

Stress incontinence is when you leak urine during activities which cause an increase in pressure in your tummy (abdomen).

What causes it?

If your pelvic floor muscles are weak they won't support your 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, but other things like chronic constipation, the menopause and heavy or repeated lifting can affect them too. Persistent coughs and being overweight 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 either be cured or significantly improved for 2 out of 3 women. It is also a risk free option, but does require you to follow a programme. Treatment will include:

- **Lifestyle interventions**

It is helpful to reduce the things in your life which put a strain on your pelvic floor muscles such as smoking, (as this can make you cough), reducing your weight (if you are overweight), or adjusting your diet to avoid constipation. Avoiding bladder irritants (such as tea, coffee and alcohol) can help and this will be discussed with you.

- **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 which supports your womb, bladder and bowel. Your physiotherapist will assess your pelvic floor muscles, to check how strong or weak they are. This may involve a vaginal examination, so that the exercise program you are given is designed specifically for you. We will give you information on this vaginal examination and a separate leaflet about these exercises.

Surgery

If the above treatments do not help enough with your symptoms, you may be offered surgery. The surgeon will discuss this with you to offer you the most suitable type of operation for your condition. Surgery may not be recommended if you have certain medical conditions or if you would like to have children in the future.

How can I manage my incontinence?

You may find it helpful to use pads to help manage leakage. It is best to use ones which are specially designed for urine, as these are more absorbent. Pads are sometimes available on the NHS; please talk to your district nurse or GP to find out about this.

Who to contact for advice

Urogynaecology Nurse Specialists

Telephone: 01865 222 767
(Monday to Friday, 8.00am to 5.00pm)

An answerphone is available for you to leave a message and we aim to return your call by the end of the next working day.

Women's Health Physiotherapists

Telephone: 01865 235 383
(Monday to Friday, 8.00am to 4.00pm)

Further help and information

Bladder and Bowel Community

Website: www.bladderandbowel.org
Email: help@bladderandbowel.org

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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