

# Stress incontinence

Information for women



## Normal bladder function

Your bladder normally 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 400-600mls (1 pint) of urine. Visits to the toilet should be around 7-8 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. When the bladder functions normally it should be possible for you to 'hold on' for a suitable and convenient time to empty your bladder.

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.

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).

## 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 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 either be cured or significantly improved for 2 out of every 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 – 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, 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 a separate leaflet about these exercises.

- **Surgery**

If the above treatments are not enough to sort out your problem, you may be offered surgery. The surgeon will discuss this with you to offer 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 for the leakage whilst you are having treatment. 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**

Tel: **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**

Tel: **01865 235 383**

(Monday to Friday, 8.00am to 4.00pm)

## Further help and information

### **Bladder and Bowel Community**

Tel: **01926 357 220**

Email: [help@bladderandbowelfoundation.org](mailto:help@bladderandbowelfoundation.org)

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **[PALS@ouh.nhs.uk](mailto:PALS@ouh.nhs.uk)**

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