



AMERICAN COLLEGE OF
OBSTETRICIANS AND
GYNECOLOGISTS

Urinary Incontinence

Many women leak small amounts of urine at times. These leaks can occur with certain physical activities or with other stress, such as coughing. Women may lose urine when they hear the sound of running water or when their hands are in water. Some women feel the urge to urinate and cannot control it. Others leak urine only while they are pregnant. When leaks become frequent or severe enough to be a problem, it is called urinary incontinence, or loss of bladder control.

About Urinary Incontinence

Urinary incontinence is more common in women than in men. Mild leakage affects most women at some time in their lives. Severe leakage is less common and affects about one in ten women.

More than one half of women who have symptoms do not seek medical care. These women may not consider leakage to be a problem or rely on absorbent pads or changes in lifestyle to deal with the problem.

Some women have the false belief that loss of bladder control is a normal part of aging.

Normal Voiding

The urinary tract is made up of four parts:

1. Kidneys, which produce urine
2. Ureters, which take urine to the bladder
3. The bladder, where urine is stored
4. The urethra, which carries urine out of the body

Normal urination (also called voiding) occurs when a woman is able to empty her bladder when she has a natural need to do so.

Types

There are five types of urinary incontinence:

1. Stress
2. Urge
3. Mixed
4. Overflow
5. Functional

Stress incontinence, which is the most common type of urinary incontinence in younger women, occurs when the pressure in the bladder is greater than the pressure in the urethra. This causes a loss of urine when a woman coughs, laughs, or sneezes. Leaks also can happen when a woman walks, runs, or does aerobics.

With urge incontinence, a woman has a sudden strong urge to void and leaks urine before she can get to the bathroom. It is sometimes called overactive bladder. Mixed incontinence occurs when a woman has both stress and urge symptoms.

Overflow incontinence occurs when the bladder does not empty all the way during voiding. It happens when the bladder muscle is not active enough or when the urethra is blocked.

Functional incontinence causes leaks to happen because other health problems keep a woman from getting to the toilet in time.

Symptoms

In addition to leaking urine often, a woman with incontinence also may have other symptoms:

- Urgency: A strong urge to urinate whether or not the bladder is full, often with pelvic pressure.
- Frequency: Voiding more often than she considers usual.
- Nocturia: The need to void during hours of sleep.
- Dysuria: Painful voiding.
- Enuresis: Bed-wetting or leaking while sleeping.

Causes

There are many likely causes of urinary incontinence. Some are short-term and easier to treat than others.

Urinary Tract Infection

Loss of bladder control may be caused by an infection of the urinary tract.

Pelvic Support Problems

The pelvic organs are held in place by supportive tissues and muscles. Support problems occur when these tissues are stretched or weakened by pregnancy, childbirth, and aging.

Urinary Tract Abnormalities

A fistula is an abnormal opening from the urinary tract into the vagina. It can allow urine to leak out through the vagina.

Neuromuscular Disorders

Neuromuscular disorders (disorders that affect muscle control) can cause a woman to leak or retain urine.

Medications

Loss of bladder control may be a side effect of medications, such as diuretics.

Diagnosis

A number of steps may be needed to find the cause of urinary incontinence. During a detailed medical history, you will be asked about factors that may affect your voiding habits. A pelvic exam will be done to detect physical conditions that might be linked to the problem. Other tests measure how well your bladder empties:

- Stress test
- Dye test
- Urodynamics
- Cystoscopy

Treatment

There are many options for treatment. Often treatments are more effective when used in combination.

Behavioral Treatments

The goal of behavioral treatment is to help a woman know why leaks occur and how to avoid them.

Physical Therapy

There are many types of physical therapy that can be done to treat urinary incontinence. One type, Kegel exercises, can help strengthen the pelvic.

Devices

Sometimes devices can be used to make the pelvic muscles stronger or to block urine.

Medications

Drugs that help control muscle spasms can help prevent leaks. Others can strengthen the muscle of the urethra. Some help relax a bladder that is too active.

Finally...

Loss of bladder control is a common problem and there are many treatment options available. However, it is important to seek professional help. If you have symptoms that affect your daily life, tell your doctor. A complete and thorough exam is needed to find the cause of the problem. In most cases, urinary incontinence can be greatly improved with treatment.

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