Your bladder

Q. What is urinary incontinence?
This is the unwanted or involuntary leakage of urine, no matter how small. Stress incontinence is the most common type in women; you leak when you cough, laugh, sneeze or play sport. The leak may be a couple of drops or a large amount of urine. Urge incontinence is when you feel the need to go the toilet and you don’t make it in time – this is often associated with frequency, having to go to the toilet very frequently during the day or night. Someone with frequency knows every toilet around!

Q. Any tips on preventing it?
First, keep your pelvic floor muscles strong especially during and after pregnancy, around menopause, and if you are having gynaecological, abdominal or spinal surgery. Keep within your healthy weight range. Don’t do anything that strains the pelvic floor muscles: avoid repetitive heavy lifting and don’t get constipated…fibre, fluids and general exercise help with this. If you have back problems, keep your pelvic floor strong as well as abdominals…your physio will help you. If you have respiratory problems and have prescribed prevention medication, use it! Stop that cough! Check with your GP if any medication you are taking may contribute to your incontinence.

Q. Isn’t it a normal part of having children or getting older?
No. But at these times of our lives incontinence is certainly more common. Many people reach old age without becoming incontinent. Fortunately, everyone can be helped, and in many cases cured, so don’t wait to see if your problem clears up by itself. It’s never too late to get help; but the sooner you seek help the better.

Q. What is normal then?
It is normal to:

• Go to the toilet 4–6 times a day, and no more than once overnight
• Pass more than a cupful each time

Do you fit the picture?

• At the back of the aerobics class
• Watch sport instead of joining in
• Housebound or decreasing social outings
• Know every toilet in town
• Can’t sit through a film
the leaks

- Get to the toilet without having to rush
- Have no trouble starting the flow of urine, and have a strong stream
- Have no need to strain to pass urine

Q. If I go to the toilet more often and drink less will that help?
No! Your bladder should hold at least a cup of urine. If you drink less and go more often, you may make it even more difficult for the bladder to hold on when you need to. So avoid going ‘just in case’ or at timed intervals unless specifically advised to do so. It’s OK to hold on, and make sure that when you do go to the toilet you don’t hurry or strain. Don’t hover over the toilet seat – always sit down to ensure bladder emptying, and never push to empty. Drink 6–8 glasses or cups of fluid a day unless you have been advised otherwise, but go easy on the caffeine…no more than 3 drinks per day is the rule.

Q. How can physio help?
Some physios have extra training in treating incontinence. Your physio can help you to find one of these. A pelvic floor physiotherapist will firstly ask you questions about your particular problem and work out a plan for your treatment. This will always involve strengthening the pelvic floor muscles and improving their endurance and coordination. In addition, you may be taught bladder retraining techniques to help your bladder hold on better. Any program will involve some general exercise, for example walking as well as strengthening other muscles that are around the pelvic floor.

Q. But I’ve done pelvic floor exercises before and they didn’t help!
Some women are unable to contract the pelvic floor muscles correctly on their own, even though they try very hard. A pelvic floor physiotherapist will help you to identify the right muscles. Working our muscles from time to time is not enough to increase strength which may be needed to cure a problem…your program needs to be performed regularly. As your strength improves, your exercise program will be increased. If muscles are very weak, your physiotherapist may suggest the use of muscle stimulation to help in the initial stages of training. Various forms of biofeedback may also be used to help you to identify and strengthen the right muscles.

Q. Does physiotherapy help everyone?
Some people may need to be referred to their GP or to a specialist for further assistance or assessment. Physiotherapists are trained to know when to refer you to another professional.

Q. How can I find a pelvic floor physiotherapist?
Look for an APA Continence/Pelvic floor physiotherapist on Find a Physio at www.physiotherapy.asn.au/findaphysio. Your physio will also be able to recommend someone if you need assistance.

How to strengthen your pelvic floor

- Start by lying down or sitting comfortably in a chair.
- Tighten the muscles around the anus, vagina and urethra all at once, and try to lift them up inside towards your belly button. These are your pelvic floor muscles.
- You may feel your lower abdominal muscles working at the same time but your buttocks and legs should be still.
- Now do some really strong squeezes …as strong as you can…then let go. Do as many of these as you can and build up to doing about 12.
- Do this a few times a day.
- If this is easy, try to do two sets then three sets of 12 with a minute’s rest in between.
- Rest while you count to five, then try again.
- If you can hold for a little longer, do so. Gradually build up until you can hold for 10–20 counts or more.
- As your muscles get stronger, you will be able to work them when you are standing up and even walking.
- Remember…don’t bear down and don’t hold your breath.
- If you can’t feel anything happening at all you may need help from a physiotherapist to learn how to work your muscles effectively.
- Don’t practise stopping the flow of urine mid-stream as an exercise. This can send incorrect messages to your bladder and stop it from emptying completely.

HOT TIPS

- It’s not always easy to do pelvic floor exercises at traffic lights when you are learning. You may need to concentrate more than that to contract your muscles well!
- Contract your muscles when you cough, sneeze, laugh, lift or blow your nose to ensure good support to pelvic organs and good bladder control.
- Muscle strengthening takes a while. Persevere, but seek help if you experience urgency, frequency, leakage, pain or vaginal heaviness. It’s best if a program is worked out specifically for you.
- Pelvic floor exercises need to be a lifelong habit. Try to get into a daily routine.