

Bladder Training to Help Correct Urinary Incontinence (Leakage of Urine)

Introduction

The involuntary leakage of urine in small or large amounts at the wrong time and/or place is called "urinary incontinence." Bladder training is a behavioural (self-help) therapy. It is used to prevent or reduce urgent or frequent urination and urinary incontinence. With bladder training, you can train your bladder to hold urine better by following a timetable to store and release urine. You can also learn to decrease the urge to urinate. As a therapy, it has no side effects. It can also be combined with other treatments such as drug therapy. Studies have shown a 50% improvement in urinary incontinence in patients using bladder training.

How Does Bladder Training Work?

Urine is produced in the kidneys and carried to the bladder in tubes called ureters. Urine collects in the bladder. As the bladder fills and stretches, a message goes to the brain that it is time to urinate. The brain sends a message down to the bladder muscle to tighten and to the sphincter muscles (the ring of muscles at the opening of the bladder that controls the flow of urine out of the bladder) to relax. The brain decides whether it is a good time and place to urinate or not. Bladder control is achieved when bladder emptying can be delayed until an appropriate opportunity to go to the bathroom arises. However, poor bladder habits and poor bladder control may develop. Good bladder habits and good bladder control can be re-established by using a schedule for urinating. Bladder training gives you that schedule. It involves voiding (passing urine) on a timed schedule and gradually increasing the amount of time between trips to the bathroom to a normal pattern. A normal pattern is 3 - 4 hours between voids (urination) during the day and one trip to the bathroom during the night. Bladder training reestablishes your control of urination.



What Causes Poor Bladder Control?

Poor bladder habits (such as running to the bathroom at the very first urge to urinate) and certain medical conditions (such as multiple sclerosis or advanced diabetes) can lead to poor bladder control. They interfere with the "bladder-brain" connection (see diagram 2). Bladder control is also influenced by hormones. The lower urinary tract (the urethra, see diagram 1) is rich in estrogen. As estrogen levels lower after menopause, you may find a need to go to the bathroom more frequently and have less ability to "hold on" when you need to urinate. Hormone replacement therapy may help to increase your bladder control by restoring estrogen to this area. This encourages healthy, strong tissues and muscles. Pelvic muscle exercises (Kegel's) can also help to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles and may increase your bladder control.

The "How To" of Bladder Retraining

1. Try to pass urine at regular times **by the clock**. Start by choosing an interval of time (an amount of time), such as one hour, that you feel reasonably confident you can manage to wait without a urinary accident.
2. During the day, go to the bathroom every hour and urinate regardless of whether you feel the need to pass urine or not. Remember, you are trying to retrain your bladder to obey **your** time table. The amount of urine voided is not important.
3. If after four days of voiding at hourly intervals you are able to successfully hold your urine, then increase the interval by 15-30 minutes for another four days.
4. Do not increase the time interval until you are able to successfully hold your urine for the time interval you are currently using. Increase the time interval by 15-30 minutes until you can comfortably hold urine for 3-3 ½ hours.
5. Make a special effort to stick to the schedule and not go to the bathroom between times.
6. If you get an urge to go to the bathroom before your scheduled time, do not run to the bathroom. If "holding on" is difficult, try and suppress (reduce) the urge by using some of the techniques described below. Remember, these feelings of urgency often have nothing to do with the amount of urine in your bladder. They can come and go without the bladder being emptied. You could go to the bathroom now in response to an urge and have a sudden strong urge to go again within a few minutes. (Remember, however, if you feel an overwhelming desire to urinate and you must go to avoid an accident, then do so).
7. Once you get rid of the urge to go to the bathroom, try to wait until your next scheduled visit. If the urge returns, try once again to get rid of it. Then when the urge has passed, go to the bathroom.

Urge Suppression Techniques (Ways to Reduce the Urge)

1. If you know how to do pelvic muscle (Kegel's) exercises, then contract (tighten) your pelvic floor muscles and hold them for 10 seconds. This tells your bladder muscle to relax and will help to reduce the urge to urinate. Repeat several times.
2. Here are several other different kinds of Kegel's exercises that you can try:
 - a) **Elevators:**
Imagine that your pelvic floor is an elevator. When the muscles are relaxed, you are on the ground floor. Slowly pull your muscles up to the second floor, stop. Then pull as tight as you can to reach the third floor, stop. Go back to the second floor, stop. Then relax completely and return to the ground floor. Take a deep breath - repeat.
 - b) **Quickies:**
Squeeze and release your pelvic muscles as fast as you can five times in a row. Relax 10 seconds, then repeat. (Great exercises to do when waiting in a lineup).

c) Long Haul:

Pull your muscles as tight as you can for as long as you can. When you feel the muscle weaken then relax. Only do this once a day to avoid tiring your muscles.

3. Mental activity can also be used to draw your attention away from the urge to urinate. It can be used alone or along with the pelvic muscle exercises. For example, try counting backwards from one hundred, doing deep breathing exercises, reciting a long forgotten poem, or watching a television programme to distract yourself from the urge to void.

Bladder Control Tips

Lifestyle guidelines to improve your bladder control:

1. Do not severely reduce the fluids you drink to avoid going to the bathroom.

Reducing the amount of fluid you drink to cope with your urinary problem may actually make your condition worse. Your body needs a certain amount of fluid to work properly (minimum 5-6 cups per day). If you are not drinking this amount, your body will conserve fluid by producing less urine. The urine you do produce may become very concentrated and irritating to the bladder. It will have a dark colour and a strong odour. In addition, a fluid intake that is too low may lead to problems with constipation. This may make your bladder problems worse.

2. Drink only moderate volumes of fluid.

It is recommended that you drink moderate amounts (5-6 cups) of non-caffeinated, non-carbonated liquids every day. You should cut back on fluids after 6 p.m. if you are waking more than once in the night to urinate. It is best to spread the intake of fluids throughout the day. Taking large amounts (over 8-10 ounces) of fluid at any single time can overwhelm the bladder and make it more difficult to hold the urine.

3. Empty your bladder before going to sleep.

Have nothing to drink for the 2-3 hours before going to bed. This should help you to avoid frequent trips to the bathroom during the night. This may also help if getting to the bathroom on time in the morning is a problem for you.

4. Always empty your bladder completely.

Always be sure that you have emptied your bladder completely. At the end of voiding, wait and give an extra push to be sure that all the urine is out.

5. Empty your bladder before and after intercourse.

6. Reduce your caffeine intake.

It is best to avoid drinks such as coffee, tea, colas, and cocoa that contain caffeine. Caffeine has a diuretic effect (causes the kidneys to increase the production of urine so that your bladder fills more quickly and you have to urinate more frequently). Caffeine may also irritate the bladder causing more contractions (tightenings), urgency (the feeling of having to rush to get to the bathroom on time) or frequency (a frequent need to urinate). Try drinking decaffeinated beverages. If you must drink beverages with caffeine, then it would be best to reduce the intake to no more than 2 cups a day. Avoid caffeinated beverages in the evening.

7. Modify what you drink.

Alcohol (for example, beer, wine, or hard liquor) can interfere with bladder control. It should be used moderately (one drink per day) or not at all. For some people, avoiding citrus juices or fruits and tomato products may also be helpful.

8. Drink "bladder-friendly" fluids.

The fluids that are most friendly to your bladder are water, apple juice and grape juice. Cranberry juice may be effective for people who have repeated bladder infections. One to two glasses per day are recommended. It will not cure an infection but it may help prevent one. Pure cranberry juice with no added sugar is recommended, not cranberry drinks which have very little cranberry content. However, if you experience urgency, cranberry juice may worsen your problem and it should be avoided.

9. Avoid going to the bathroom "just in case."

If you experience sudden strong urges to go to the bathroom and are unable to make it in time, you may find yourself going to the bathroom more often "just in case". You may do this even though you may not have the urge to urinate. Do **not** go to the bathroom before you have the urge to urinate. This may reduce your ability to tolerate your bladder filling. And, never run to the bathroom. Use deep breathing, pelvic floor (Kegel's) exercises, and/or distraction to control the urge to urinate. After the urge has passed, walk slowly to the bathroom while continuing to squeeze your pelvic muscles.

What Can I Hope to Achieve with Bladder Retraining?

1. To reduce the total number of times you pass urine in a day to about 5-7 times.
2. To increase the time between bathroom visits to about 3-4 hours.
3. To reduce or eliminate your feelings of urgency (urgent need to pass urine).
4. To increase your bladder capacity (amount of urine your bladder can hold before urination).
5. To encourage voiding (urinating) larger volumes of urine.
6. To reduce the number of trips to the bathroom during the night to one.
7. To reduce or eliminate your urinary "accidents."
8. To reduce your anxiety and increase your confidence about your bladder habits.

Remember...

1. Never go to the bathroom on an URGE.
2. Avoid going "just in case." Do not use every opportunity to urinate.
3. Control your bladder, don't let it control you.
4. Try your best, it is worth the effort.