

Overview

What is urinary incontinence?

Urinary incontinence simply means leaking urine. Incontinence can range from leaking just a few drops of urine to complete emptying of the **bladder**. Incontinence is a common problem, and there are many treatment options available.

What other symptoms occur with urinary incontinence?

It is common for other symptoms to occur along with urinary incontinence:

- **Urgency** –Having a strong urge to urinate
- **Frequency** –Urinating (also called voiding) more often than what is usual for you
- **Nocturia** –Waking from sleep to urinate
- **Dysuria** –Painful urination
- **Nocturnal enuresis** –Leaking urine while sleeping

What are the types of urinary incontinence?

Urinary incontinence in women can be divided into three main types:

1. Stress urinary incontinence (SUI) is leaking urine when coughing, laughing, or sneezing. Leaks can also happen when you walk, run, or exercise.
2. Urgency urinary incontinence is a sudden strong urge to urinate that is hard to stop. You may leak urine on the way to the bathroom. If you have an "overactive bladder," it means that you have symptoms of urgency and frequency that may or may not include incontinence.
3. Mixed incontinence combines symptoms of both SUI and urgency urinary incontinence.

What causes urinary incontinence?

There are many causes of urinary incontinence. Often, there is more than one cause. Some causes of urinary incontinence are easily diagnosed. Others are more complex. Some of the causes of urinary incontinence include the following:

- **Urinary tract infection (UTI)** – **UTIs** sometimes cause leakage and are treated with **antibiotics**.
- **Diuretic** medications, caffeine, or alcohol—Incontinence may be a side effect of substances that cause your body to make more urine.
- **Pelvic floor disorders** –These disorders are caused by weakening of the muscles and tissues of the **pelvic floor** and include urinary incontinence, **accidental bowel leakage**, and **pelvic organ prolapse**.
- **Constipation**—Long-term constipation is often present in women with urinary incontinence, especially in older women. Treating constipation may help with urinary symptoms.
- **Neuromuscular problems**—When nerve signals from the brain to the bladder and **urethra** are disrupted, the muscles that control those organs can malfunction, allowing urine to leak. Muscle control problems can occur in conditions such as **diabetes mellitus**, **stroke**, or **multiple sclerosis**.
- **Anatomical problems**—The outlet of the bladder into the urethra can become blocked by bladder stones or other growths. The urethra may develop an abnormal pouch called a **diverticulum** that causes urine leakage or dribbling. A **fistula** is an abnormal connection from the urinary tract into another part of the

body, such as the [vagina](#) , which allows urine to leak out. Pelvic surgery, radiation treatment, pelvic cancer, or childbirth may cause a fistula.

Diagnosis and Treatment

How is urinary incontinence diagnosed?

The first steps in assessing urinary incontinence are usually a medical history and physical exam:

1. Medical history—Your [obstetrician–gynecologist \(ob-gyn\)](#) should ask you to explain your signs and symptoms in detail. You may be asked to fill out a bladder diary for a few days. In a bladder diary, you record the time and amount of leakage as well as the times you urinated. You also note how much liquid you drank and what you were doing when a leak happened.
2. Physical exam—A [pelvic exam](#) may be done to see if you have pelvic organ prolapse and to look for other anatomical problems. A "cough test" may be done during the exam. During a cough test, you are asked to cough and bear down with a full bladder to see if urine leaks. A pad test may be done, in which you wear a pad that absorbs leaked urine. The pad is weighed for the amount of leakage. A test to measure the support of the urethra may be done.

Can urinary incontinence be treated?

If symptoms of urinary incontinence bother you and are having a negative effect on your life, you may want to seek treatment. Most cases of urinary incontinence can be cured or greatly improved with treatment.

What types of treatment are recommended for urinary incontinence?

Treatment depends on the type of incontinence you have and your goals for treatment. How much your symptoms bother you is an important factor in deciding on a treatment plan.

Your ob-gyn may first recommend nonsurgical treatment. This may include lifestyle changes, bladder training, physical therapy, and using certain bladder support devices. For urgency urinary incontinence, the treatment may involve medication. Surgery may help certain types of incontinence. Often, several treatments are used together for the best effect.

What lifestyle changes can help decrease urine leakage?

- Losing weight. In overweight women, losing even a small amount of weight (less than 10 percent of total body weight) may decrease urine leakage.
- Managing your fluid intake. If you have leakage in the early morning or at night, you may want to limit your intake of fluids several hours before bedtime. Limiting how much you drink may also be useful (no more than 2 liters of fluids total a day). If your urine is pale or has no color, you may be drinking too much. Limiting alcohol and caffeine may be helpful as well.
- Training your bladder. The goal of bladder training is to learn how to control the urge to empty the bladder and increase the time span between urinating to normal intervals (every 3 to 4 hours during the day and every 4 to 8 hours at night). After a few weeks of training, you may leak urine less often.

What types of exercise and physical therapy can help treat urinary incontinence?

[Kegel exercises](#) can help strengthen the pelvic muscles. These exercises are helpful for all types of incontinence. You may also be referred to a physical therapist who specializes in pelvic health. [Biofeedback](#) is a training technique that may help you locate the correct muscles.

In one type of biofeedback, sensors are placed inside or outside the vagina that measure the force of pelvic muscle contraction. When you contract the right muscles, you will see the measurement on a monitor. This feedback lets you know that you are doing Kegel exercises in the right way. There are in-home biofeedback devices that you can use as well.

What devices can help treat urinary incontinence?

A [pessary](#) is a device that is inserted into the vagina to treat pelvic support problems and SUI. Pessaries support the walls of your vagina to lift the bladder and urethra. They come in many shapes and sizes.

Your ob-gyn can fit you for a pessary to find the right one to help your symptoms. Usually you can insert and remove a support pessary yourself. Pessaries may provide relief of symptoms without surgery.

There is also an over-the-counter tampon-like device that is designed specifically to help prevent bladder leaks.

What medications can help treat urgency urinary incontinence?

Many medications are available to help reduce the symptoms of urgency urinary incontinence and overactive bladder:

- Medications that control muscle spasms or unwanted bladder contractions can help prevent leakage from urgency urinary incontinence and relieve the symptoms of urgency and frequency. They are available in pill form or as a skin gel or skin patch. A medication called oxybutynin is available over-the-counter as a patch. Possible side effects include dry mouth, dry eyes, and constipation.
- Mirabegron is a medication that relaxes the bladder muscle and allows the bladder to store more urine. This medication is used to treat urgency urinary incontinence and relieve the symptoms of urgency and frequency.
- Injection of a drug called onabotulinumtoxinA into the muscle of the bladder helps stop unwanted bladder muscle contractions. The effects last for about 3 to 9 months. Possible side effects include UTI and, in about 5 in 100 women, an inability to empty the bladder. If this happens, you may need to use a [catheter](#) to drain the bladder for a few days to a few weeks.
- [Estrogen](#) medication inserted into the vagina may help with urinary incontinence.

What types of surgery can treat stress urinary incontinence?

The following procedures may help treat SUI:

- Slings—Different types of slings, such as those made from your own tissue or **synthetic** materials, can be used to lift or provide support for the urethra. The synthetic midurethral sling is the most common type of sling used to correct SUI. This sling is a narrow strap made of synthetic mesh that is placed under the urethra.
- Colposuspension—Stitches are placed on either side of the **bladder neck** and attached to nearby supporting structures to lift up the urethra and hold it in place.
- If surgery is not an option for you or has not worked for your SUI, urethral bulking may help. A synthetic substance is injected into the tissues around the urethra. The substance acts to "plump up" and narrow the opening of the urethra, which may decrease leakage.

Talk about the risks and benefits of each option with your health care professional. Read [Surgery for Stress Urinary Incontinence](#) to learn more.

What procedures are available to treat urgency urinary incontinence?

When other treatments have not worked or are not an option for you, nerve stimulation may be considered. Types of nerve stimulation include the following:

- Sacral neuromodulation—This is a technique in which a thin wire is placed under the skin of the low back and close to the nerve that controls the bladder. The wire is attached to a battery device placed under the skin nearby. The device sends a mild electrical signal along the wire to improve bladder function.
- Percutaneous tibial nerve stimulation (PTNS)—PTNS is a procedure that is similar to acupuncture. In PTNS, a thin needle is inserted near a nerve in the ankle and connected to a special machine. A signal is sent through the needle to the nerve, which sends the signal to the pelvic floor. PTNS usually involves weekly 30-minute office sessions for a few months.

Glossary

Accidental Bowel Leakage: Involuntary loss of control of the bowels. This condition can lead to leakage of solid stool, liquid stool, mucus, or gas. Also called fecal incontinence.

Antibiotics: Drugs that treat certain types of infections.

Biofeedback: A technique used by physical therapists to help a person control body functions, such as heartbeat or blood pressure.

Bladder: A hollow, muscular organ in which urine is stored.

Bladder Neck: The narrow part of the bladder above the urethra, the tube that empties urine from the bladder.

Catheter: A tube used to drain fluid from or give fluid to the body.

Diabetes Mellitus: A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

Diuretic: A drug or substance that increases the production of urine.

Diverticulum: An abnormal pouch or sac in an internal organ or structure.

Dysuria: Pain during urination.

Estrogen: A female hormone produced in the ovaries.

Fistula: An abnormal opening or passage between two organs.

Frequency: Needing to urinate more than seven times per day, or more often than is usual for you.

Kegel Exercises: Pelvic muscle exercises. Doing these exercises helps with bladder and bowel control as well as sexual function.

Multiple Sclerosis (MS): A disease of the nervous system that leads to loss of muscle control.

Nocturia: The number of times sleep is interrupted by the need to urinate.

Nocturnal Enuresis: The involuntary loss of urine at night while asleep.

Obstetrician–Gynecologist (Ob-Gyn): A doctor with special training and education in women's health.

Pelvic Exam: A physical examination of a woman's pelvic organs.

Pelvic Floor: A muscular area that supports a woman's pelvic organs.

Pelvic Floor Disorders: Disorders which affect the muscles and tissues that support the pelvic organs.

Pelvic Organ Prolapse: A condition in which a pelvic organ drops down. This condition is caused by weakening of the muscles and tissues that support the organs in the pelvis, including the vagina, uterus, and bladder.

Pessary: A device that can be inserted into the vagina to support the organs that have dropped down or to help control urine leakage.

Stroke: A sudden interruption of blood flow to all or part of the brain, caused by blockage or bursting of a blood vessel in the brain. A stroke often results in loss of consciousness and temporary or permanent paralysis.

Synthetic: Made by a chemical process, usually to imitate a natural material.

Urethra: A tube-like structure. Urine flows through this tube when it leaves the body.

Urgency: A strong desire to urinate that is difficult to control.

Urinary Incontinence: Involuntary loss of urine.

Urinary Tract Infection (UTI): An infection in any part of the urinary system, including the kidneys, bladder, or urethra.

Vagina: A tube-like structure surrounded by muscles. The vagina leads from the uterus to the outside of the body.

If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

Don't have an ob-gyn? [Learn how to find a doctor near you.](#)

FAQ081

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