

Got to go right now: overactive bladder can make social activities uncomfortable
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How many times do you have to leave a movie to go to the toilet? Do you avoid going to certain places because there is no bathroom? Are you often thinking about where the next bathroom is or limiting what you drink for fear of leaking? You are not alone. Over 33 million Americans (1 in 6) have these symptoms usually referred to as Overactive Bladder (OAB). Bladder urgency is the sensation that you have to empty your bladder immediately. It can be so strong it feels like urine will leak out if you do not empty. Some even have pain with bladder urgency. Urgency can be a signal that the bladder is contracting even if you are not on the toilet.

How did this happen?

Overactive bladder may be related to constipation, certain medications, or a urinary tract infection so it is important to speak to your doctor about your symptoms. In addition, it may be related to bad habits. The bladder is a relatively simple sack that responds to many types of training. For instance, your mother may have helped train your bladder as a child by running water to encourage you to urinate in the toilet. This may work well to help children train but it can back fire. In some circumstances the bladder is trained so well it begins to empty whenever it hears running water: while washing dishes, walking past a fountain, at the beach. Another example is the habit of urinating "just in case". That is urinating right before you leave home "just in case" there is no bathroom where you are going. That might have been a problem years ago but now we have access to bathrooms in almost all locations - the mall, Wal-Mart, grocery store, your friend's house. There are really very few places where there is not access to a bathroom. If you practice "just in case", your bladder will eventually become so well trained that it will begin to squeeze just as you are getting ready to the house - even if there is very little urine in the bladder.

How should the bladder work?

The bladder's main job is to store urine until you reach the toilet. Sometimes it does not want to store leading to bladder urgency and leakage. As we have discussed, the bladder wants to empty even if you are not on the toilet. A bladder that stores well gives a mild sensation of the need to urinate about every 2 to 4 hours - see box "Expected bladder pattern" for more details.

Expected Bladder Pattern
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of urinations per 24 hours - less than 7• Average number of hours between urination - 2 to 4 hours• Number of urination at night - 0 to 2 depending on age• Size of each urination 6 to 10 ounces

It is often difficult to remember your bathroom usage. It is best to write down when you urinate and drink. Some medical professionals have special bladder diaries to help record the information. The first thing is to take records and see how close you are to the expected pattern.

What goes in must come out

It is necessary to take in the correct amount and types of fluids to have normal bladder storage. Total fluid intake should be 6 to 8 eight ounce glasses per day (48 to 64 total ounces). Research shows that drinking too much and too little increases urgency and leakage. Speak with your doctor about how much fluid you should drink per day. One measure is urine color. It should be pale yellow. Urine that is dark yellow is often a sign you are not drinking enough (although some medications can change the color of urine). There are some fluids which increase urine production and urgency. You guessed it - caffeine and alcohol. It is best to eliminate these fluids from your diet if you have bladder urgency.

Training the bladder

After medical causes for urgency have been ruled out and you have normalized your fluid intake, place the bladder on a schedule. Ask the bladder to empty on the clock, not your sensation. This might mean going to the bathroom before you have the urge and it might mean suppressing the urge to void. Remember your bladder responded to bad-habit training and you can get it to respond to good-habit training. If you have the urge to urinate before your time, sit down and keep your mind busy until the urge subsides, then try to wait until your next scheduled time or walk quietly to the bathroom.

It is really not that bad

Changing habits and training the bladder takes effort. A little urgency, or a little leakage might not affect your choice of activities, but research shows that urgency often gets worse with age and habits are harder to change if they have been active for a long time. We also know that urgency and urine leakage increases depression, social isolation, embarrassment, and anxiety. Take time now to check your urinary habits and correct them if needed.

My urgency is so bad it certainly will not get better with such a simple treatment

These suggestions may seem simple but they are very powerful. However, bladder training is sometimes challenging and it may be necessary to work with a medical professional to achieve the best results. If you have a significant amount of bladder urgency (even if you have failed medications or surgery) speak with your doctor about seeing a training physical therapist.

Kegel exercises for bladder control

Did you know: 55% of women wear pads during exercise

Studies show 55 % of women wear pads during exercise for urine leakage. In addition, 20 % of women report stopping exercise and 16% changed exercise because of leakage. “But I have had a few children”. “Isn’t it inevitable when women get older?” Urine leakage is not normal under any circumstance. Urine leakage is not inevitable even after children and when older. There is help. Exercising the pelvic floor muscles helps to correct and avoid urine leakage.

Have you heard of Kegel Exercises? They are commonly taught in childbirth classes, and often mentioned in women’s magazines. But what are they? Kegel exercises are contractions of the Pelvic Floor Muscles (the muscles around your vagina and your rectum). These muscles close off the urethra and rectum to keep urine and feces in until you reach the toilet. Weak Pelvic Floor Muscles may let urine and feces leak out (often at embarrassing moments). This is called incontinence. Strengthening the Pelvic Floor Muscles helps to control or prevent incontinence of urine or feces. Many events in a women’s life may contribute to Pelvic Floor Muscle weakness (childbirth, surgery, menopause). Men may have weakness after prostate surgery. All women and men should practice Kegel exercises to prevent or improve Pelvic Floor Muscle weakness.

The Pelvic Floor Muscle is like any other muscle – USE OR LOSE IT. It is a muscle under voluntary control and can be exercised with the same principles as the arm or leg muscles. However, it is important to do the exercises correctly and long enough. These muscles are inside the vagina, difficult to see and often difficult to feel. Many women are unsure of how to do the exercise, get easily discouraged, stop and give up.

It is difficult to describe the Kegel exercise and often requires a medical professional’s help to identify the pelvic floor muscles. Many women and men are told to stop urine flow to identify the muscle. This can help you gain an awareness of the muscle but is not helpful if the muscle is very weak and may confuse the bladder if it is done too often. **DO NOT STOP URINE FLOW AS AN EXERCISE.** In order to perform the Kegel exercise alone, it may help to visualize that you are in a crowded room of important people and you suddenly feel that you have to pass gas. The activity of holding back gas is the Kegel exercise. You can get more information about the muscle if you insert your index finger a short distance into the vagina during the Kegel exercise. You should feel the muscle squeeze and lift your finger into your body. It is very important not to squeeze the buttock, legs or belly. It is a small movement, no one should know you are doing the Kegel exercise, and there is no movement on the outside of the body.

Start doing the exercises lying down in a quiet place. In the horizontal position (lying on your side or back), gravity does not pull down on the muscle thus making the exercises easier. Second, it is important to pay close attention to what you are feeling while doing the exercises. A quiet environment helps you to concentrate better and focus on the correct exercise. When you can do the Kegel exercise well, you can try advance to the sitting and standing positions and then while doing other activities like driving or watching TV.

Learning a new exercise is like learning to ride a bike; someone tells you a little about it, holds the back of the bike for a little while, you discover how to do it and then they let go of the bike. Physical therapy for pelvic floor muscle strengthening is just like holding the back of the bike. We have machines and techniques to help you learn the exercises correctly. Once you learn them, you must continue them on your own for several months to see results. Try the suggestions in this article and ask your doctor for more information. If you are unable to strengthen the muscle on your own, speak to your doctor about individualized physical therapy.

