

## Urinary Incontinence

by Jan Busby-Whitehead, MD and Kim Clarke, RN, MSN, ANP  
Joseph G. Ouslander, MD and Neil Resnick, MD – content experts

Urinary incontinence, or leaking urine, involves unwanted or unplanned loss of urine, sufficient enough to cause social, cleanliness, or personal problems. With proper treatment, most cases can be greatly improved or cured.

---

**Q . I thought that leaking urine was just a normal part of aging. Isn't that true?**

**A .** Urinary incontinence is not a part of the normal aging process. It is a sign that there is an underlying problem. In most cases, a health care provider can find out the cause of the incontinence.

**Q . What are the different types and symptoms of urinary incontinence?**

**A .** Urge incontinence, or overactive bladder, is the most common type of incontinence. It occurs when you suddenly feel as though you need to urinate, but are unable to reach the bathroom in time. There can be many different causes of an overactive bladder.

Stress incontinence happens when there is a sudden increase in pressure (stress) in your stomach caused by laughing, coughing, sneezing, exercising, or lifting something heavy.

Mixed incontinence is a combination of stress and urge incontinence.

Overflow incontinence occurs when the bladder cannot empty properly. Because the bladder never empties completely, it may feel full again very quickly. Some people may have periodic leaking without any sensation of fullness. Overflow incontinence cannot be diagnosed by these symptoms alone and tests must be performed.

Functional incontinence occurs when a person has difficulty getting to the bathroom due to illness, arthritis or the environment. This type of incontinence is uncommon and can only be established as a cause after other causes have been excluded by a professional.

**Q . What causes urinary incontinence?**

**A .** Remember, urinary incontinence is a sign of an underlying problem.

Among the causes are:

- Weakened pelvic muscles that support the bladder
- Medical problems that affect the bladder's ability to hold and empty urine
- Urinary tract infections
- Constipation
- Dehydration
- Certain prescription and nonprescription medications.

**Q . How is urinary incontinence treated?**

**A .** A variety of treatments have been successful in improving or curing urinary incontinence. Treatment options include behavioral techniques, medications, and surgery. Depending on the type of incontinence you have, a combination of treatments may be prescribed.

**Q . What is meant by behavioral treatments?**

**A .** Behavioral treatments are techniques that you can use to help you to gain control over your bladder. They include: bladder training; pelvic muscle (Kegel) exercises; changes in your diet and fluid intake; and management of constipation.

**Q . What is bladder training?**

**A .** Doctors will often prescribe bladder training, a technique that helps a person control the urgent need to urinate. Often used in combination with pelvic muscle exercises, it helps the person to learn to regain control over the bladder and decrease the frequency of trips to the toilet.

**Q . What are pelvic muscle or Kegel exercises?**

**A .** Kegel exercises involve squeezing and relaxing a set of muscles in the pelvic or genital area. They are an effective treatment for many people who suffer from stress, urge, or mixed urinary incontinence. If not learned properly, however, they can make the leaking worse. The success of these exercises depends upon good instruction and daily practice.

**Q . Are there medications I can take?**

**A .** Several medications may help, including those that treat infection, stop abnormal bladder muscle contractions, or increase the amount of urine the bladder can hold. If you are taking medication to treat incontinence, your health care provider will need to see you on a regular basis until a correct dose is determined. If you experience side effects from the medication, your doctor will want to be sure that they are appropriately addressed.

**Q . How can I prepare for my doctor's appointment?**

**A .** Keep a diary of your trips to the toilet and your wet episodes for three days. Jot down what you were doing when the accidents occurred. Bring to your visit all the medication you take on a regular basis, including those drugs that a doctor prescribed and those you take on your own. Be familiar with your medical history, especially any problems you have had in the past with your bladder or kidneys. This will help your health care provider recommend the best treatment for you. You should also bring a list of questions to ask at your visit. Then, talk to your health care provider about your problem. Remember, an overactive bladder is not a normal part of aging!



**Q . For more information:**

**A .** AGS Foundation for Health in Aging  
Incontinence in *Eldercare at Home*  
<http://www.healthinaging.org/eldercare/chap10.xml>

Bladder Health Council c/o American Foundation for Urologic Disease  
300 West Pratt Street, Suite 401  
Baltimore, MD 21201  
(410) 727-2908

National Association for Continence  
P.O. Box 8310  
Spartanburg, SC 29305  
1-800-BLADDER or (800) 252-3337

Simon Foundation  
Box 835  
Wilmette, IL 60091  
1-800-23-SIMON or (800) 237-4666

---

[PEC Updated 6-20-09]



**The AGS Foundation for Health in Aging**

The Empire State Building · 350 Fifth Avenue · Suite 801 · New York, NY 10118 · 212-755-6810 (ph) · 212-832-8646 (f)

[www.healthinaging.org](http://www.healthinaging.org)