

Are Your Bladder Habits Normal?

Incontinence is not something most people like to talk about. In fact some people aren't even aware that their bladder habits are abnormal especially when certain television commercials even enforce the belief that "light bladder leakage" is normal. Two common types of incontinence are **stress incontinence** and **urgency incontinence**. But first what is normal bladder function?

Normal Bladder Function

Our bladders are designed to stretch in order to store urine and then to contract to dispel it. Normal intake involves drinking 6-8 glasses (or 1.5-2 litres) of fluid per day, (not including diuretic drinks such as coffee or alcohol). Based on this input normal bladder function entails:

- 4-6 voids during the day
- Overnight no more than one void
- Average volume of 250-600ml per void (males have larger bladders & consequently larger voids)
- Ability to hold or defer going when not appropriate to void
- Ability to completely empty bladder
- No leakage of urine at any time
- Passing a continuous stream of urine with no pain or burning

Stress Incontinence

Stress incontinence involves leaking small amounts of urine when there is an increase in abdominal pressure which consequently pushes down on the bladder. This commonly affects females more than males and occurs with activities such as jumping, coughing, sneezing, laughing, walking and running. The most common causes of stress incontinence in women are pregnancy, childbirth and menopause. During pregnancy and childbirth the pelvic floor muscles are stretched and weakened which then affects their ability to contract around the urethra and stop urine flow. During menopause the hormone oestrogen (which helps maintain the thickness of the lining of the urethra and keeps it sealed after passing urine) is produced in lower quantities and incontinence can occur at this time. Stress incontinence in men can occur after prostate surgery and can take 6-12 months to resolve.

Urgency Incontinence

Urgency incontinence is a sudden and strong urge to urinate. For some it may occur with triggers such as putting the key in the door when getting home, running water, being in a cold environment or while on the way to the toilet. With a normally functioning bladder, the bladder muscle (detrusor) stays relaxed as the bladder gradually fills up. The bladder gradually stretches and when it's about half full we get a feeling of wanting to pass urine. You should be able to hold on after this feeling until it is appropriate to use the toilet. With urgency incontinence the bladder may feel fuller than what it actually is. This means the bladder contracts too early, when it is not appropriately full and not when you want it to. This results in the sudden need for the toilet and perhaps leaking before you get there. It is also common that you feel you need to frequently pass urine and may wake several times during the night to do so (nocturia). The cause of urgency incontinence is not well understood however it seems to be more common as we age and symptoms may worsen with caffeinated drinks, alcohol and stress. Other causes include constipation, an enlarged prostate gland or simply as a result of a long history of poor bladder habits.

Bladder calming techniques can be a good way to help suppress the urgent need to urinate. These techniques are more effective if you start using them at the first sign of bladder irritability and not when you are "busting". Try these techniques next time you are approaching a situation where there is a typical trigger for your bladder:

- Toe curling – curl toes downwards as if making a fist and hold this position for as long as the bladder is feeling urgent
- Pelvic floor and tummy hollowing contractions - squeeze and lift through your pelvic floor and draw your lower abdominals "up and in" until the urgency goes away. Make sure you don't hold your breath.
- Controlled walking - don't run to the toilet – it will stimulate your bladder to be upset



Good Bladder Habits

Whether you have problems with urinary incontinence or not it is important to adopt good bladder habits as a form of prevention. Good habits include:

- No “just in case” visits to the toilet
- Limit the amount of caffeine (coffee, tea, Coca-Cola and chocolate) and alcohol you drink
- Try and avoid artificial sweeteners as these can make your bladder symptoms worse
- Try and keep your weight within a healthy range for your height
- Perform **pelvic floor exercises**
- Correct sitting position on the toilet when emptying bladder – lean forward, relax abdominals

Pelvic Floor Exercises

The pelvic floor muscles are a layer of muscles that are located along the bottom of the pelvis and play an important role in supporting the organs that lay on it. The pelvic floor muscles control the elimination of urine, faeces and gas and when relaxed allow the bladder or bowel to release its contents. It is therefore important that these muscles are kept in good condition so that they are able to activate correctly to ensure no leakage from the bladder or bowel and to prevent prolapse (protrusion of bowel, uterus or bladder into the vagina). Pelvic floor muscles can weaken due to pregnancy, child birth, frequently heavy lifting, chronic coughing, constipation, being overweight, lack of general exercise and a change in hormone levels at menopause.

To activate your pelvic floor “squeeze and lift”, imagining that you're stopping the flow of urine and holding in wind. Ensure that you continue breathing and keep your bottom and upper abdominals relaxed.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_570351&feature=iv&src_vid=HrRjumD_o4s&v=lwM_wwijerv8#t=2h17m

The gold standard for exercising your pelvic floor is holding a pelvic floor contraction for 10 seconds, performing 10 repetitions once per day. However there is no point in performing these exercises if you're not doing them correctly, so start with shorter contractions and gradually increase to 10 second holds. Other forms of exercise such as Pilates can help strengthen your pelvic floor. Your pelvic floor muscles along with your transverse abdominis (deep abdominal muscle) and multifidus (deep back muscle) make up your core muscles.



Pilates can teach you correct core activation. Some people when they try to engage their core actually bear down on their pelvic floor rather than squeezing and lifting. When performed correctly Pilates can be a great way to improve pelvic floor activation and endurance.

If you are having any problems with continence it is important that you consult a healthcare professional. Our physiotherapists in particular can help with pelvic floor muscle dysfunction and offer education and treatment concerning issues with bladder and bowel function. Bodysmart also offers Pilates classes for Beginners, Intermediates and Pregnancy with each class run by our qualified physio's with a maximum group size of 5 to allow adequate supervision. More information is available at www.bodysmartcentre.com.au or by calling reception (08) 9481 8708.