



Patient Information

Understanding Urinary Incontinence

Urinary incontinence is a loss of bladder control that can range from mild leaking to uncontrollable wetting. Millions of people experience urinary incontinence, and it is most common in older people. People who experience urinary incontinence might find this problem embarrassing — but they shouldn't. Consider this: Only one of every 12 women with stress urinary incontinence seeks help for her condition.

Talk to your nurse practitioner to learn the best methods of treatment. If you experience urinary incontinence and don't try to treat it, you risk getting rashes, sores and skin or urinary tract infections.

This handout will help you determine which type of urinary incontinence you may be experiencing.

Urge Incontinence

If you often have an urgent need to urinate and cannot get to a toilet quickly enough to prevent wetting, you are experiencing urge incontinence. This occurs when nerve passages from the bladder to the brain are damaged, causing a sudden bladder contraction that you can't stop. When this happens, your brain does not give enough warning for you to get to the toilet in time. Sometimes something specific will trigger urination, such as hearing running water.

Urge incontinence is a symptom of overactive bladder (OAB). The underlying cause of OAB is that the detrusor muscle of the bladder contracts often and incorrectly. The reason is unknown. In men, it could be a prostate problem. In others, it may be a neurological problem. Stroke, dementia, Alzheimer's disease and multiple sclerosis can also cause urge incontinence.

Stress Incontinence

People with weak stomach muscles experience stress incontinence. Sudden pressure on these muscles causes your bladder to leak. This may happen with any movement that may put pressure on the bladder. People who experience stress incontinence do not feel the urge to urinate when they experience leaking.

Stress incontinence is more common in women and can occur because pelvic muscles are weakened from childbirth. Pelvic muscles may also be weakened by a fracture or a surgical procedure.

Mixed Incontinence

If you are experiencing symptoms of urge incontinence and stress incontinence, you have mixed incontinence. One type of incontinence may be more severe than the other.

Overflow Incontinence

If you experience a constant dripping of urine, you may have overflow incontinence. This type of incontinence is caused by a bladder that is too full. People experiencing overflow incontinence often cannot empty their bladder completely and may strain when urinating.

This type of incontinence occurs most often in men, because it can be caused by something blocking the flow of urine, such as an enlarged prostate gland or tumor. Overflow incontinence can also be caused by diabetes or a spinal cord injury.

Functional Incontinence

Functional incontinence occurs in people who can control their urine but have trouble getting to the bathroom in time. For example, a disease such as arthritis may make it hard for a person to get to the toilet quickly enough. External obstacles may also prevent a person from getting to the bathroom in time, as can a problem with thinking or communicating.

Treatment

Many treatment options for urinary incontinence can help improve or even cure the problem. Behavioral treatments include scheduling times to use the bathroom, bladder training and pelvic muscle exercises. You can also manage your fluid by decreasing or eliminating your intake of coffee, tea, colas and alcoholic beverages — drink fluids regularly, but do not drink excessive amounts.

Medication is another treatment option. Prescription medicines can help you in different ways: some prevent unwanted bladder contractions, others relax muscles so that the bladder can empty more fully, while others tighten muscles to reduce leakage.

And for some people, surgery can help.

You can also buy special absorbent underclothing to wear while trying different treatments. Talk to your nurse practitioner to decide which treatment option is best for you.

Some information adapted from The National Association for Continence (www.nafc.org).

Additional Notes:

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