



Bladder Incontinence

What is bladder incontinence?

Bladder incontinence is an accidental leakage of urine. Also known as urinary incontinence, it affects more than 25 million people in the United States, including cancer survivors. Talk frankly with your doctor if you have incontinence issues, because it can often be managed to improve your quality of life.

Some cancers and related issues can increase the risk of urinary incontinence. Prostate cancer and cancers of the pelvis, such as bladder and rectal cancer, may be the first to come to mind. But, other cancers can also trigger incontinence, and for a number of reasons. These include:

- Breast cancer — hormonal therapies can dry out vaginal or urethral tissues and cause incontinence
- Lung/esophageal cancer — a chronic cough can strain or stretch the muscles involved in urination
- Brain or Spinal Cord Tumors — these can impact the nerves that control bladder or pelvic muscles

Nausea or vomiting that sometimes occurs during any cancer treatment also can lead to leakage, called stress incontinence.

Signs and symptoms of bladder incontinence

- Accidental urine leakage that may dampen underwear or be bad enough to soak clothes
- Having an urgent need “to go” or being unable to “hold it”
- Frequent urination
- Pain or discomfort when urinating

Not all types of bladder incontinence are the same. The most common types of incontinence are:

- **Stress incontinence:** People with stress incontinence may leak urine when laughing, coughing, sneezing, lifting, exercising or standing up.
- **Urge incontinence:** Those with urge incontinence have the need to urinate often. They must get to a restroom quickly to prevent leaking. The urge sensation can be uncomfortable or even painful.
- **Mixed incontinence:** Individuals with mixed incontinence commonly have both stress and urge symptoms.
- **Overflow incontinence:** This occurs when an obstruction to the urine flow causes the bladder to overflow and leak small amounts. Signs might be getting up often during the night to go to the bathroom, taking a long time to urinate or having a weak, dribbling stream.

How do you diagnose bladder incontinence?

Talk with your doctor if you have problems controlling your bladder. They will work with you to figure out the reason. One step may include keeping a bladder journal. This will help track when you urinate, how often, and how much. Your doctor may also order tests to help diagnose incontinence.



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How do you treat urinary incontinence?

Sometimes urinary incontinence can last a short time, depending on what's causing it. But, sometimes, incontinence can be long-term and uncomfortable, making some everyday activities difficult to manage.

There is no single, right way to cope with bladder incontinence. The challenge is to find what is best for your situation, so you can get the help you need and return to a normal daily life. Talk with your doctor, who may recommend any of the following options:

- **Pelvic floor muscle strengthening:** A physical therapist that specializes in pelvic floor muscle exercises (Kegel exercises) can help you gain better bladder control by teaching you exercises that tighten and relax the muscles that control the flow of urine.
- **Bladder training:** This helps you manage how often you need to urinate throughout the day by assigning certain time intervals to empty your bladder.
- **Medicines:** Certain medications can target either the muscles of the bladder, the muscles that control urine flow or the nerves.
- **Surgery:** In some cases, surgery may be used to correct long-term incontinence by removing blockages or injecting collagen to tighten the muscle that controls urine flow.
- **Incontinence products:** Certain products, such as pads worn under your clothing, are available to help keep you active and comfortable. Adult briefs and undergarments are bulkier than pads but provide more protection. Bed pads or absorbent mattress covers can help protect bed linens and mattresses.

The following tips may help make incontinence less of a problem:

- Empty your bladder every 3 to 4 hours while awake, to avoid accidents.
- Empty your bladder before bedtime or before heavy activity.

- Limit drinks with caffeine. Avoid alcohol and citrus juices, which can irritate the bladder and make you have to go more often.
- Avoid hygiene products that may irritate you (perfumed soaps, scented lotions, powder, toilet wipes with alcohol). Women should avoid feminine spray or over-the-counter vaginal suppositories.
- Try to keep weight in check, which can lessen pressure on the bladder.
- Avoid using tobacco, which can cause coughing and bladder irritation due to harmful substances in tobacco products.
- Talk to your doctor about all medicines, vitamins, herbs, and supplements you're taking. Some may affect urine control.

Additional Resources

- Washington University Physicians: wuphysicians.wustl.edu
 - Female Pelvic Medicine and Reconstructive Pelvic Surgery
 - Urology
 - Occupational Therapy
- STAR (Sports Therapy and Rehabilitation)
BJC HealthCare: barnesjewishwestcounty.org/star

This handout is for informational purposes only. It should not be used in place of advice or instructions given by your doctor. Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have questions about your care.

Survivorship Program Mission

To improve the quality of life of cancer patients through education, research and wellness. The survivorship program supports patients, families and caregivers throughout the continuum of diagnosis, treatment and beyond.

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