

PATIENT INFORMATION

The Overactive Bladder and Bladder Retraining

Normal Bladder Function

Your bladder should normally hold 400-600mls (1pint) of urine. It is normal to visit the toilet approximately 4-8 times during the day and possibly once during the night. The bladder should act like a balloon and fill gradually. The outlet for the urine (the urethra) is normally kept closed. This is helped by the pelvic floor muscles beneath the bladder.

When the bladder functions well it should be possible for you to “hold on” for a suitable and convenient time to empty your bladder. The bladder is a muscle called the “detrusor”. When the detrusor contracts (squeezes), the muscles that close the urethra relax and the bladder will empty.

There are lots of complex nerve messages that are sent between the brain, bladder and pelvic floor muscles. These influence the sensation of your bladder filling and the use of the right muscles at the right time.

What are the symptoms of an Overactive Bladder?

- Little warning of needing to go to the toilet (this is called urgency).
- Urinating frequently and often only small amounts of urine.
- Difficulty making it to the toilet on time, this might result in urine leakage (urge incontinence).
- Getting up frequently overnight to pass urine (this is called nocturia).

What causes an Overactive Bladder?

The most common cause of overactive bladder is a long history of poor bladder habits but often there is no known cause. Other members of your family may suffer from similar symptoms. Stress can make the problem worse.

An overactive bladder can be a problem for many people of all ages.

How is it treated?

1. Change your drinking habits.

- Many people with an overactive bladder reduce the amount they drink. However this can make the problem worse as the bladder never gets the opportunity to fill up fully. The urine also becomes more concentrated, which can irritate the bladder.
- Aim to drink 1.5 to 2 litres a day (approx. 6-8 drinks), although this amount will vary depending on the weather, your activity levels and your weight.

There are a number of drinks that may irritate the bladder, try to have them less often or stop having them completely. Drinks which may irritate the bladder are:

- Drinks containing caffeine such as tea, coffee and green tea.
- Carbonated/fizzy drinks
- Drinks containing aspartame (an artificial sweetener can also be labelled E951)
- Hot chocolate
- Alcohol
- Blackcurrant juice and citrus fruit juices

2. Bladder Retraining

This is a way of teaching your bladder to hold more urine; it should be carried out in small stages. To build confidence, try it at home at first before you try it when you are out and about:

- When you feel the urge to pass urine, do not go. Instead try to hold on for 5 minutes (by trying some of the ideas below)-
- If the urge is too great, it is reasonable to go to the toilet immediately, just try again with the next urge.
- If the urge doesn't pass, you've done really well to manage the 5 minutes, Go to the toilet and try the same technique next time.
- If the urge passes, continue with what you were doing. Next time you get the urge, empty your bladder without holding on.
- During the next week, do the same thing but try to delay passing urine for an additional 5 minutes. Your bladder will gradually learn to hold more and more.

3. Learning to suppress the urges

- Distract yourself (e.g. doing a crossword, count down from 100, think of girl/boy names beginning with a certain letter – plan this strategy in advance).
- Contract/squeeze your pelvic floor muscles for up to 20 seconds.
- Stop still or cross your legs.
- Press on your pelvic floor with your hand/arm of chair/edge of a table.
- Try standing on your tiptoes or curling your toes.
- Remove/avoid triggers e.g. turn off running taps etc-

4. If overnight you wake with a strong urge to urinate, it is reasonable to empty your bladder straight away. Consider restricting fluids for 2 hours before going to bed. As you improve during the day your night patterns will also improve.

5. Try to avoid “just in case” visits to the toilet, this makes your bladder become even more sensitive.
6. When passing urine, don’t rush and some people find it helpful to wiggle to make sure their bladder has emptied completely.

For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.

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