

Bladder Control for Women*

Urine Leakage: A Common Health Problem for Women of All Ages

You may think bladder control problems are something that happen when you get older. The truth is that women of all ages can have urine leakage. This problem is also called incontinence. Men can leak urine too, but the problem is more common in women.

- Many women leak urine when they exercise, laugh hard, cough, or sneeze.
- Often women leak urine when they are pregnant or after they have given birth.
- Women who have stopped having their periods (menopause) often report bladder control problems.
- Female athletes of all ages sometimes have urine leakage during strenuous sports activities.

Urine leakage may be a small bother or a large problem. About half of all adult women say they have had urine leakage at one time or another. Many women say it's a daily problem.

Urine leakage is more common in older women, but that doesn't mean it's a natural part of aging. You don't have to "just live with it." You can do something about it and regain your bladder control. Incontinence is not a disease. But it may be a sign that something is wrong. It's a medical problem, and a doctor or nurse can help.



How does the bladder work?

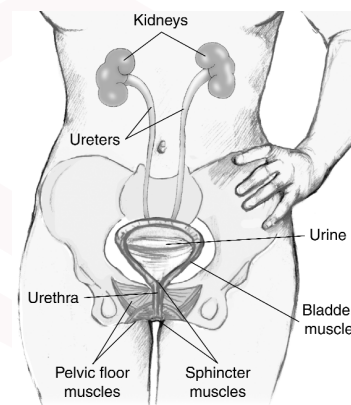
The bladder is a balloon-shaped organ that stores and releases urine. It sits in the pelvis. The bladder is supported and held in place by pelvic muscles. The bladder itself is a muscle.

The tube that carries urine from your body is called the urethra. Ring-like muscles called sphincters help keep the urethra closed so urine doesn't leak from the bladder before

you're ready to release it.

Several body systems must work together to control the bladder.

- Pelvic floor muscles hold the bladder in place.
- Sphincter muscles keep the urethra closed.
- The bladder muscle relaxes when it fills with urine and squeezes when it's time to urinate.
- Nerves carry signals from the bladder to let the brain know when the bladder is full.
- Nerves also carry signals from the brain to tell the bladder when it's time to urinate.
- Hormones help keep the lining of the bladder and urethra healthy.



Bladder control problems can start when any one of these features is not working properly.

What are the different types of bladder control problems?

Not all bladder control problems are alike. Some problems are caused by weak muscles, while others are caused by damaged nerves. Sometimes the cause may be a medicine that dulls the nerves. To help solve your problem, your doctor or nurse will try to identify the type of incontinence you have. It may be one or more of the following six types.

1. **Temporary incontinence** - As the name suggests, temporary incontinence doesn't last. You may have an illness, like a urinary tract infection, that causes frequent

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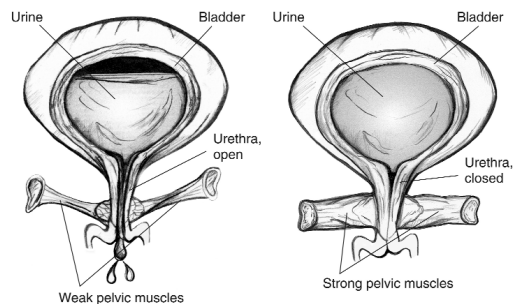
and sudden urination that you can't control. Or you may find that a new medicine has the unexpected side effect of increasing your urination. These problems go away as soon as the cause is found and corrected.

2. **Stress incontinence** - If you leak urine when you cough, laugh, sneeze, or exercise, you have stress incontinence. Mental stress does not cause stress incontinence. The "stress" is pressure on the bladder. When your pelvic and sphincter muscles are strong, they can handle the extra pressure from a cough, sneeze, exercise, or laugh. But when those muscles are weak, that sudden pressure can push urine out of the bladder.
3. **Urge incontinence** - If you leak urine after a strong, sudden urge to urinate, you have urge incontinence. This bladder control problem may be caused by nerve damage from diabetes, a stroke, an infection, or another medical condition.
4. **Mixed incontinence** - Mixed incontinence is a mix of stress and urge incontinence. You may leak urine with a laugh or sneeze at one time. At another time, you may have a sudden, uncontrollable urge to urinate just before you leak.
5. **Functional incontinence** - Some people have trouble getting to the bathroom. If you have urine leakage because you can't walk or have other mobility problems, you have functional incontinence.
6. **Overactive bladder** - If you have to urinate eight or more times a day, you may have an overactive bladder. Getting up to urinate two or more times each night is another sign of overactive bladder. With an overactive bladder, you feel strong, sudden urges to urinate, and you also may have urge incontinence.

What causes bladder control problems?

Weak muscles

Most bladder control problems are caused by weak pelvic muscles. These muscles may become stretched and weak during pregnancy and childbirth. Weak muscles let the bladder sag out of position, which may stretch the opening to the urethra.



Nerve damage

Damaged nerves may send signals to the bladder at the wrong time. As a result, a bladder spasm may push out urine without warning. Sometimes damaged nerves send no signals at all, and the brain can't tell when the bladder is full. Nerves can be damaged by diseases or trauma. Diseases and conditions that can damage the nerves include:

- diabetes
- Parkinson's
- multiple sclerosis
- stroke

Trauma that can damage the nerves includes:

- pelvic or back surgery
- herniated disc
- radiation

Medicines, alcohol, and caffeine

Leaking can happen when medicines affect any of the muscles or nerves. You may take medicine to calm your nerves so that you can sleep or relax. This medicine may dull the nerves in the bladder and keep them from signaling the brain when the bladder is full. Without the message and urge, the bladder overflows. Drinking alcohol can also cause these nerves to fail. Water pills— diuretics —take fluid from swollen areas of your body and send it to the bladder. This rapid filling may cause the bladder to leak. Caffeine drinks such as coffee and cola also cause the bladder to fill quickly. Make sure your drinks are decaf.

Infection

A urinary tract infection can irritate bladder nerves and cause the bladder to squeeze without warning. This type of incontinence goes away once the infection has been cured.

Excess weight

Being overweight can put pressure on the bladder and contribute to stress incontinence.

* Adapted from The National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse (NDIC), a service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). The NIDDK is part of the National Institutes of Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This publication is not copyrighted.