

Integrated Regional Falls Program



North Simcoe Muskoka LHIN

Managing Bladder Control Problems (Incontinence)

It is estimated that more than one in five senior adults in Canada experiences some type of bladder control problem, resulting in an involuntary release of urine (Health Canada, 2006).

This condition is known as urinary incontinence. It can limit social contacts due to embarrassment, can negatively affect feelings of well-being, and can also cause stress, leading to other health problems.

Different Types of Incontinence

There are four basic types of incontinence: stress, urge, and overflow and functional. They may occur alone, or in combination, especially in seniors.

Stress incontinence is the involuntary leakage of small amounts of urine in response to increased pressure on the bladder (e.g., when you sneeze, laugh, cough or lift something heavy). It is present in about 35% of incontinent seniors. It is more common in women, often because childbirth caused the pelvic muscles to relax. It also occurs, usually temporarily, in men who have had prostate surgery.

Urge incontinence is the leakage of large amounts of urine when someone is unable to reach the toilet after getting the urge to urinate. It accounts for 60-70% of incontinence problems in seniors.

Overflow incontinence accounts for 10-15% of urinary incontinence. It occurs when there is an obstruction in the bladder, which causes the bladder to overfill. Often, there is no sensation that the bladder is full. Then, when the bladder contracts, urine is released.

Functional incontinence accounts for 25% of the incontinence seen in the frail elderly. It often happens because a person has difficulty moving from one place to another. Poor vision, hearing or speech may interfere with reaching the toilet or telling caregivers of the need to use the toilet.

Causes of Incontinence

Some of the causes include: weakened pelvic floor muscles, diseases such as Parkinson's and diabetes, stroke, injuries, and the side effects of surgery. Certain medications can also contribute to incontinence such as diuretics (water pills) and heart and blood pressure medications. Some food and drink choices may also contribute to the problem. Alcohol can alter memory, impair mobility and cause increased urine output. Sugar can irritate the bladder. Caffeine, which is found in coffee, tea and chocolate, can cause the body to shed water. Other factors such as constipation and bladder infection this can cause or worsen incontinence.

Treating Incontinence

Treatment depends on the type of incontinence you have, your age, medical history, and how you choose to proceed. The first step is to have your situation assessed by a medical professional. An assessment will include a medical history and physical examination, a mental assessment (if indicated), and an assessment of your surroundings. Together, you can discuss the best treatment for your particular situation.

Conservative treatment options include the following:

- Fluid Intake: Adequate fluids are important for normal function of the urinary tract; 1500-2500 ml per day is recommended. Inadequate fluid intake can lead to concentrated urine, irritating the bladder, causing urgency and frequency. Gradually increase your fluid intake which will allow your

bladder to adjust to the increase amounts. The majority of fluids should be taken before 7pm to avoid night-time visits to the bathroom. While water is the best fluid for your bladder, other fluids such as grape juice, cranberry juice and apple juice can also be used in substitution.

- Toileting Habits: Chronic holding of urine can lead to an overstretched bladder resulting in poor bladder emptying however on the other hand emptying the bladder too frequently can result in the bladder's inability to hold urine. Good toileting habits include regular emptying of the bladder. Most people feel the urge to urinate once the bladder fills to 400 ml. However physical changes that occur naturally with age result in a smaller bladder capacity therefore emptying the bladder every 2-3 hours is reasonable.
- Bladder Irritants: Certain food and beverages can irritate the bladder leading to urgency and frequency. Potential irritants include; milk and milk products, carbonated drinks, citrus fruit and juices, tomato based products, spicy foods, sugar, honey and corn syrup, and artificial sweetener. Alcoholic beverages including, beer and wine, increase urination while decreasing the awareness of the need to urinate therefore leading to incontinence.
- Caffeine: Caffeine causes urgency and frequency of urination. Coffee, tea, some soft drinks and chocolate all contain some degree of caffeine. In addition, some medications such as headache and sinus/allergy remedies contain caffeine. When eliminating caffeine, gradually reduce caffeine intake over several weeks to avoid symptoms of withdrawal such as headache and fatigue. There are several alternative beverages such as, herbal tea and grain based beverages that can be used in place of caffeine based beverages.
- Smoking: Smoking often times leads to a chronic cough and chronic coughing can damage of the bladder sphincter at the base of the bladder, which in turn lead to incontinence. In addition, by-products in tobacco can be irritating to the bladder, resulting in urgency and frequency. Bladder cancer has also been linked to smoking therefore sudden onset of bladder urgency or frequency should be investigated promptly.
- Strengthen the Pelvic Floor Muscles: Kegels are easy to do and can be done anywhere without anyone knowing.
 - Find the muscles you use to stop urinating.
 - Squeeze these muscles for 3 seconds. Then relax for 3 seconds. Your stomach and thigh muscles should **not** tighten when you do this.
 - Add 1 second each week until you are able to squeeze for 10 seconds each time.
 - Repeat this exercise 10 to 15 times per session. Try to do this at least 3 times a day.
 - **Note:** Don't do Kegels while you urinate. Doing them during urination can hurt your bladder.
- Constipation: Chronic constipation can lead to improper bladder emptying, incontinence and urinary tract infections. Constipation can be caused by a medical condition or by a variety of medications. For many people, gradually increasing their dietary fibre and fluid intake can correct the problem of constipation. Physical activity can also stimulate bowel activity; daily walking and simple exercise in a chair can have a positive effect on a sluggish bowel.

Minimizing Your Risk

If bladder control problems are affecting your quality of life, talk to your health care provider about the possible causes and the treatment options that can help you. Try not to be discouraged. In most cases, incontinence can be cured, treated or managed.

References

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