

Physiotherapy Service

Patient Information

Information

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Author: Jane Lofts
Role: Highly Specialist
Physiotherapist
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Stress Incontinence

What every woman needs to know

What is it?

'I wet myself laughing' is a very common expression- and a very common complaint. Around 40% of women leak urine when they laugh, cough or take exercise. This is known as 'Stress incontinence', and it is a physical, rather than a mental stress. Many women also feel the need to pass urine very often which is known as 'urgency' or 'urge incontinence'.

When does it happen?

During childhood, after the first intercourse, during pregnancy, after childbirth and the menopause.

Why does it happen?

Muscles play a large part in bladder control and if they are weakened you are more likely to leak urine. The bladder is a muscular bag that can stretch or shrink, depending on how much urine there is in it.

We know that babies have little control over their bladders but most of them will be dry during the day by the time they are two or three years old.

Some children take longer because the nerve supply to the bladder has not fully matured. Regular toileting and lots of patience usually overcome this problem before they go to school.

During childbirth, the muscles of the pelvic floor can be overstretched as the baby passes through the birth canal and they may not return to their original shape.

The hormone changes that take place during the menopause can make pelvic floor muscles lose their elasticity and they become weaker.

Women who have stress incontinence tend to visit the lavatory at frequent intervals in order to cut down the risk of 'accidents'; their bladders therefore shrink in size because they are never allowed to become full. The bladder then cannot hold as much urine, the urge to empty it arises more quickly and it leaks more easily.

So if you tend to wet yourself a little when you cough, laugh, lift, sneeze or even walk quickly, it is the right moment for you to spend a little time each day strengthening your pelvic floor muscles.

What is a pelvic floor?

You may never have heard of these muscles before.

They are comprised of several layers and are slung from the front to the back of your pelvis like a hammock. As their name implies, they form the floor to the bony basin of the pelvis and support the pelvic organs and their contents.

In the middle of the hammock there are three openings; the front opening from the bladder is called the urethra, the central one is the vagina and the back passage opens at the anus. Muscle fibres control these openings (sphincters). It is the strength of the muscles and the control of the sphincters which maintain the walls of these passages and keep the pelvic organs in their correct positions.

One of the reasons that they are so important is that muscles surrounding the urethral and vaginal openings are involved in the stopping and starting of passing urine.

If the walls to the vaginal passage become lax due to weakened pelvic floor muscles, the hammock sags, the pelvic floor contents are not given adequate support and you no longer have complete control over your bladder. You then find yourself in the embarrassing situation of leaking a little urine. Being aware of the pelvic floor muscles and paying them attention will help you overcome this problem of stress incontinence.

As a test to feel these muscles moving, sit upright on a hard chair and give a big cough. You will feel them pressing down between your legs. Strengthening them means working them in the opposite direction!

One exercise is all that is needed

The easiest way to begin is to lie down on your back with a pillow behind your head, knees bent and feet on the floor. Be conscious that your abdominal, thigh and buttock muscles should remain relaxed during the exercise.

How to do pelvic floor exercises

Tighten up your back passage and then your front passage, and try to draw up inside and count slowly to four whilst you are doing it. This allows the small group of muscles time to reach their fullest contraction.

Now relax.

You might find it easier to imagine the increase in tightening is like going up in a lift slowly, one floor at a time, getting extra tightness floor by floor until the fourth floor is reached. Then slowly relax.

This exercise should be done four times (or as your physiotherapist advises) at any one session and three sessions daily. You also need to practise four quick pull-ups of these muscles, three times a day.

This exercise can be done sitting and standing, which means you can do it anywhere, any time. Try thinking of several activities during a normal day like washing the dishes or peeling potatoes. Link your exercise with the activity. This helps you to remember the exercise so that it becomes a habit, 'little and often' being the secret of successful pelvic floor strengthening.

Once a week try to stop midstream when emptying your bladder. Hold to the count of four before finishing your stream. Never do this during the first time you pass urine in the morning.

If your muscles are weak you may find you cannot hold to the full count of four, or even that you leak when you are trying to hold. This will act as a guide to how strong your muscles really are.

AVOID:

- **Lifting heavy objects**
Like supermarket shopping
- **Coughing**
without tightening your pelvic floor first
- **Sneezing**
without tightening your pelvic floor first
- **Constipation**
- **Being overweight**

All these actions put tremendous downward pressure and strain on your pelvic floor and you could undo all the good work you have been doing.

Finally allow twelve weeks for real improvement. It will test your patience and endurance, but it will be worthwhile to feel happily dry, comfortable and at ease again.

After three months, test the muscle as follows:

When your bladder is about three hours full, stand with your feet apart, jump up and down and cough several times. If there is no leakage, continue the pelvic floor exercises three sessions daily for the rest of your life.

DRINKS to avoid:

Caffeine (tea, coffee, chocolate, coca cola)

Fruit juices

Alcohol

These will stimulate or irritate your bladder and make you leak.

Make sure you only drink 6 to 8 x 250ml mugfuls of fluid daily.

Physiotherapy

If you become damp after the three months test, then see your GP. It is possible you may need more specialised help from the physiotherapy department. Don't worry, a little physiotherapy treatment could help the tone of your muscles. It would help you feel the correct contraction and teach you how to work to get the most out of those weary muscles. Together with strengthening your pelvic floor, you may even require extra help to re-train your bladder if your particular problem is urge incontinence. Physiotherapy can successfully help your incontinence problems and perhaps prevent you needing to have an operation.

In many cases of urinary incontinence, the simple measures outlined will prove effective. In a few cases, however, the cause of the problem is more complicated and this may need surgery.

If your symptoms do not respond to simple remedies within a few weeks, consult your GP in case there are more serious problems.

Make
'CONTINENCE AND CONFIDENCE'
your motto

Further Information

**Therapy Services
Rehabilitation Department
Dorset County Hospital
Williams Avenue
DORCHESTER
Dorset
DT1 2JY**

Contact Number: **01305 255314**