

Happy Bladders and Overactive Bladder

Introduction

People with symptoms of urgency, frequency and getting up to empty their bladder during the night, with or without leaking, often find that they get caught in a vicious circle. It is natural to worry if you feel that your bladder might let you down. You therefore become over-sensitive to feelings of bladder fullness and tend to rush off to the toilet at the first sensation of needing to go. The bladder becomes accustomed to holding smaller and smaller amounts of urine and sends signals that it is full, earlier and earlier. The more often you go, the more you need to go. Some people end up feeling that the bladder needs emptying several times every hour and often go to the toilet 'just in case'. Worrying and rushing make urgency worse. In the rush to go it is difficult to hold on to your bladder and you may leak urine. It is also common to be able to hang on until you get home but, in the panic to open the front door, have an accident on the doorstep. The symptoms of overactive bladder naturally tend to fluctuate.

Bladder Retraining

The purpose of bladder training is to learn to control the desire to empty your bladder, so that a more normal pattern is achieved, without urgency, frequency or leaking. It should be possible to get through the night without getting up more than once to go to the toilet. (Twice is normal after 70 years of age).

There are several things that you can try:

1. Plan your trips to the toilet to be regular and timed. Choose the length of time you are comfortable waiting before going to the toilet. This may be as little as 20 minutes, for example. If you have completed a bladder diary then choose the smallest time interval on your diary sheet between trips to the toilet. Go to the toilet first thing in the morning, regularly at each set time interval and last thing at night. Every three to four days, increase this gap by 15 minutes until you are comfortably going to the toilet every 3 - 4 hours
2. When you first feel the urge to go to the toilet, try and wait until the feeling has passed. This usually takes 8 – 10 seconds. Once the urge has gone go calmly to the toilet and empty your bladder. These tips may help you 'hang on':
 - Stand still or sit down
 - Cross your legs
 - Try deep breathing or a relaxation technique
 - Press on your pelvic floor
 - Tighten your pelvic floor muscles
 - Sit on the edge of a hard chair
 - Try talking to yourself: "I can wait" or "I am in control"
 - Distract yourself by reciting the 8x table, sending a text etc
 - Suck your thumb!

If you are liable to start leaking urine when you hang on, wearing an absorbent pad may add to your confidence. It can be very difficult at first, but it really does get easier with practice!

If you find that you can reduce or eliminate the urge but it returns on the way to the toilet, stop and repeat the process.

At night, see if you can suppress the urge and go back to sleep. If this does not work, go to the toilet and try again next time.

3. Once you are confident you can 'hang-on', try delaying setting off for the toilet and increase this time by five minutes a day until you are going every 3 – 4 hours.

Fluid volume

While you are re-training your bladder you should not limit the amount you drink. Most adults need to drink 1½ litres of fluid in a day (more in hot weather or if very active), depending on your body size. A good rule of thumb is to drink about 24ml for every kilo of body weight, per day. However, this intake can be timed to your convenience. Drink less if you are going out or will be away from a toilet for a long time, and make it up when you get home. Remember that some foods, such as soup, fruits and salads, contain a high water content and this contributes to your fluid intake.

Fluid types

Some people find that certain drinks upset their bladders more than others. It may be worth cutting out each one in turn to see if this helps: Coffee (strong filter coffee especially); tea (often worse than coffee); fizzy drinks; squash; alcohol (especially spirits, champagne and white wine); fruit juice; Ribena; decaffeinated drinks; and drinks containing sweeteners.

If you drink a lot of coffee, tea or cola, reduce your intake over 7-10 days to avoid side effects of caffeine withdrawal. You could also try drinking water only for a few days, then introduce one drink at a time and note its effect on your bladder. Other bladder-friendly drinks are milk, chamomile tea and peppermint tea.

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Foods

Some people find that certain foods may irritate their bladder. Try cutting out some or all of the following and see whether it helps you: Apples, bananas, melon, cheese, chocolate, chilli, spicy foods, citrus fruits, cranberries, grapes, guava, raw onions, peaches, pineapple, plums, prunes, raisins, rye bread, sour cream, soy sauce, strawberries, tomatoes, vinegar and yoghurt.

Nights

If you get up more than once in the night to empty your bladder, try to minimise or stop drinking for three hours before you go to bed. If you are taking medication to help reduce the amount of fluid in your body (diuretics), taking them towards the end of the afternoon may help the night-time frequency to improve.

Other ideas

There is some evidence that a product called D-Mannose may be of benefit, along with vitamin D.

There is good evidence that losing weight, if appropriate, can help.

Habits to avoid as much as possible include squatting over the toilet and straining to empty your bladder – they can aggravate your symptoms. It is also important to avoid constipation.

Bladder training requires considerable willpower and determination. Symptoms may get worse before they get better. It may take 6 weeks before you notice an improvement but if there is no change by this time it is worth trying a course of tablets to help your bladder to relax while you continue the training programme.