

Leaking Urine

All about stress urinary
incontinence



*In*contact
www.incontact.org



Why this booklet?

Incontact provides information and support for people with bladder and bowel problems. We publish a quarterly magazine, information sheets about helpful products and a range of booklets...all available free. See page 10 for details of these. There is also a website where you can find more information and contact other people with similar problems - www.incontact.org

What is stress incontinence?

Many people leak urine when they cough, sneeze or laugh. This is called stress incontinence. This problem affects over two million people in the UK - it is extremely common. Doctors often call it "SUI" or stress urinary incontinence.

For some people, stress incontinence only happens during exercise like running or lifting something heavy. But stress incontinence can happen with very light activity like walking, talking or getting up from a chair.

Stress incontinence is not caused by emotional stress or worry.

The good news is that most people with this problem can be helped. Many people can be cured completely. This booklet explains what causes stress incontinence and how it can be helped.



It's only a little leak... but it's still very embarrassing



Who can get stress incontinence?

Stress incontinence can affect men and women of all ages, although it is more common amongst women.

Some women are born with stress incontinence. For some, it can cure itself at puberty. But a few women will be affected all their lives. Stress incontinence can start being a problem for women later in life too.

For men, stress incontinence is often a problem after surgery for prostate problems.

How the bladder works

Urine is collected and stored in the bladder. The bladder is a muscle, shaped like a balloon. In between visits to the loo, the bladder relaxes and fills up. When you go to the loo the bladder squeezes and the pelvic floor muscles relax - urine comes out through a tube called the urethra.

There are two other muscles, which prevent urine from leaking out of the bladder:

The pelvic floor

Both men and women have a pelvic floor. This is made of layers of muscles, which hold the bladder and bowel in place. The pelvic floor muscles also help to stop leaks from the bladder and bowels.

The sphincter is a circular muscle that goes around the urethra - the tube that urine comes out of. The sphincter muscle normally squeezes as the bladder is filling up - it creates a seal so urine can't leak out. When you go to the toilet, the sphincter muscle relaxes.

What causes stress incontinence?

Stress incontinence usually happens because the muscles in the pelvic floor or sphincter are weak or damaged.

In women, these muscles can be weakened during pregnancy by the extra weight and natural hormonal changes. Childbirth can cause more problems, possibly if the second stage of labour is long, the baby is large, or if forceps are used.

Many women have some leakage of urine during pregnancy but most bladder problems get better after delivery. Pelvic floor exercises (see page 6) can help with these problems.

Some women develop stress incontinence after the menopause. This is because the pelvic floor becomes weaker. Even before the menopause, some women may notice that stress incontinence becomes worse in the week before a period. Occasionally, stress incontinence occurs after having a hysterectomy and some operations on the bladder.

People who have had constipation for a long time, or a bad cough, may also be prone to stress incontinence. Men can develop stress incontinence after a prostate operation.

Can stress incontinence be prevented?

Pelvic floor exercises may be able to help prevent stress incontinence. They should be started when we are young and continued through life. It is important for women who are thinking about having children, or who have become pregnant, to begin a regular routine of these exercises.

Men who are planning to have surgery on their prostate may also benefit from starting these exercises. Pelvic floor exercises can also help men and women enjoy sex more.

Who can help with stress incontinence?

The first thing to do is talk to your doctor or nurse. It may also be useful to start by calling your local continence advisor or continence nurse specialist. These are nurses who specialise in bladder problems. Incontact can provide you with the phone number of your local continence nurse - or you can ask your GP.

The doctor or nurse will assess you. Be ready to answer these questions:

- How often do you go to the loo?
- How often do you leak or have an accident?
- When do you leak or have accidents?
- What medicines do you take?
- What do you normally eat and drink?
- Is it painful or uncomfortable when you go to the loo?

Here are some tests that your doctor or nurse may recommend. Ask him or her to explain what any test involves and how it can help.

Urinalysis - this test needs a sample of urine to find out if there is any infection, or any blood in your urine.

Residual urine - this is to find out if there is any urine left in your bladder after you have gone to the loo. The doctor or nurse will insert a catheter into the bladder through the urethra. This can be a little uncomfortable. Another way to check residual urine is by using an ultrasound machine to take a bladder scan.

Internal Examinations - the doctor or nurse puts their fingers inside the vagina (for women) or back passage (for men). This can show how strong the pelvic floor muscles are. For men, this can detect if the prostate gland is enlarged.

Urodynamics - this test can help find out the cause of bladder problems. It involves putting a thin catheter into the bladder through the urethra, and another into the rectum through the anus. This can be quite uncomfortable but the catheter is removed as soon as the test is over. This test is only carried out in special hospital units.

What treatment is available?

Once you know what is causing your problem, you will be able to discuss possible treatments with your doctor or nurse. They will explain what the problem is and how the different treatments can help. They will explain any

side effects too - these are extra problems that can be caused by the treatment. Together, you can decide which treatment is the most suitable.

The following pages give some information on treatments you may be offered, as well as ways of helping yourself.

Pelvic floor exercises

Pelvic floor exercises can help strengthen the muscles in the pelvic floor, giving you more control over your bladder and helping to prevent leaks.

It is important to learn to do the exercises in the right way. Talk to your continence advisor or physiotherapist to make sure you are doing them correctly.

Imagine that you are trying to stop yourself passing wind. To do this you must squeeze the muscle around the back passage. You should be able to feel the muscle move. This is the back part of the pelvic floor.

Now imagine that you are about to pass urine - picture yourself trying to stop the stream of urine. This is the front part of the pelvic floor.

Here is how to exercise your pelvic floor muscles. Slowly tighten and pull up the pelvic floor muscles as hard as you can - this is a slow pull-up. Count how many seconds you can hold on for, and then relax. Repeat as many times as you can.

Now pull the muscles up quickly and tightly, then relax immediately - these are fast pull-ups. Count how many times you can do this without resting.

You need to practice pelvic floor exercises regularly to make them stronger. Do these two exercises - slow and fast - at least 10 times every day. Each time you do slow pull-ups, try and hold on a little longer. Try and do more fast pull-ups each time too.

Try and get into the habit of doing your exercises with things you do regularly - every time you touch water, every time you answer the phone, every time you are waiting for the bus...whatever you do several times a day.

You may not notice any improvement for several weeks, even months, so it is important that you keep practising. If the exercises are not helping, go back to your a doctor, nurse or physiotherapist for more help and advice.

Electrical stimulation

Some people can be helped by electrical stimulation of the pelvic floor. Both men and women can try this treatment. A probe is placed in the vagina (for women) or back passage (for men). The probe carries an electrical current, which can strengthen the pelvic floor muscles. This is very useful for people who find it hard to do pelvic floor exercises in the normal way.

This treatment is normally carried out under the supervision of a continence advisor or specialist physiotherapist - although machines are available for you to treat yourself at home. To find out more about this treatment, you should talk to a continence advisor or physiotherapist.

Surgery

There are many different surgical procedures available for the treatment of stress incontinence. Some people can be helped by surgery, but sometimes surgery can make things worse.

Incontact produces a fact sheet with details of the common operations for stress incontinence - just let us know if you would like a copy.

Your doctor will discuss with you what any operation involves, and what the result is likely to be. Always ask if you are unsure about anything.

Future treatments

New treatments and operations are always becoming available - you can find out the latest through *Incontact's* magazine.

Injections. One new treatment option involves injecting a gell to 'bulk-up' the urethra. The procedure is quick and no incisions are made - it is normally possible for women to go home the same day and recovery is quick. However, it is not a permanent solution as the effects wear off over time.

Medication. The first ever medication for the treatment of stress incontinence is also being developed. This treatment increases the activity of the nerve that stimulates the urethral sphincter, improving its function. We will tell you if and when it is approved for use within the UK.

How can I cope with stress incontinence?

Stress incontinence causes many practical problems. Some people cannot be completely cured. Others may have problems while they are waiting for treatment. For these people, special products are available to help with the condition.

Pads and pants

Specially designed pads and pants can absorb leaks from the bladder. Some are disposable, others can be washed and re-used. You may be able to get free pads from your local health authority - otherwise there are many varieties available for sale in shops or by mail order. *Incontact* has information about the different types and designs available.

Other products

Sheaths and leg bags may be useful for men who don't want to use pads. A sheath fits over the penis and urine is carried into a special bag, usually strapped to the leg.

A penis clamp is also available which may help some men with stress incontinence. For women there are other products that can help - these are called 'occlusive devices' - ask your doctor or nurse about these. All of these devices, for men and women, should be fitted by a health professional.

Other information from *Incontact*

Booklets

A Healthy Bladder - and what to do if things go wrong

Just Can't Wait - help for people who have to rush to the loo

Troubled Nights - help for people who wet the bed

Healthy Bowels - and what to do if things go wrong

Product Information Sheets

Bed and cushion protection

Catheters for intermittent use

Drainage bags

Indwelling catheter accessories

Indwelling catheters - users' guide

Intermittent catheters - users' guide

Medication for urinary incontinence

Pads & pants - disposable

Pads & pants - washable

Penile sheaths

Skin care and hygiene

Suprapubic catheters - users' guide

Surgery for urge incontinence

Surgery for Stress incontinence

Surgical procedures for incontinence

Urinals - body worn

Urinals - hand-held

Incontact Magazine

The *Incontact* magazine comes out four times a year and contains news, readers' views, letters and pen pals.

All of these are available free for people affected by bladder or bowel problems, and their carers. *Incontact* gratefully receives donations - these help us do more to help the millions of people in the UK living with these conditions. Cheques can be made out to '*Incontact*' - or get in touch with us to find out more about making a Gift Aid donation or leaving a legacy to help our work.

Where to go for more help

Incontact

United House, North Road

London N7 9DP

Tel: 0870 770 3246

e-mail: info@incontact.org web: www.incontact.org

The Cystitis and Overactive Bladder Foundation

76 High Street, Stony Stratford

Buckinghamshire MK11 1AH

Tel: 01908 569169

e-mail: info@cobfoundation.org

web: www.cobfoundation.org

PromoCon

offers advice and information on products that can help manage bladder and bowel problems.

Redbank House, St Chad's Street, Manchester M8 8QA

Telephone: 0161 834 2001

E-mail: promocon@disabledliving.co.uk

The Continence Foundation

has information leaflets and a helpline:

307 Hatton Square, 16 Baldwins Gardens, London EC1N 7RJ

Telephone: 0845 345 0165, Monday to Friday, 9.30 a.m. to 1.30 p.m.

e-mail: continence.foundation@dial.pipex.com

web: www.continence-foundation.org.uk

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