

Information for Women about Urinary Incontinence and Vaginal Prolapse

SELF MANAGEMENT

A. LIFESTYLE CHANGES

With **urge incontinence**, the problem is an overactive bladder muscle. Urge incontinence can be improved by reducing things that irritate the bladder. This may involve lifestyle changes such as avoiding caffeine (e.g. coffee, tea and colas) and other irritants such as alcohol, cigarettes, artificial sweeteners, spicy foods and citrus.



Regular toileting every 2-3 hours may also help some women with urge incontinence to prevent episodes of leaking.

Stress and urge incontinence, and fecal incontinence, can be improved by changes like:

- Achieving a healthy weight by eating a nutritious diet and getting regular exercise,
- Drinking 6 -8 cups of fluid per day, two-thirds of which should be water.
- Avoiding constipation.

Caffeine content of some common foods and drinks

Product	Serving Size (unless otherwise stated)		Milligrams of Caffeine (approximate values)
	oz	ml	
Coffee, filter drip	8	237	179
Coffee, decaffeinated	8	237	3
Tea (leaf or bag)	8	237	50
Green tea	8	237	30
Decaffeinated tea	8	237	0
Cola beverage, regular	12	355 (1 can)	36 - 46
Cola beverage, diet	12	355	39 - 50
Chocolate milk	8	237	8
Candy bar, milk chocolate	1	28g	7
Baking chocolate, unsweetened	1	28g	25 - 58
Chocolate cake	2.8	80g	36
Chocolate pudding	5.1	145g	9

Source: Health Canada (www.hc-sc.gc.ca)

B. BLADDER RETRAINING

If you have **urgency/urge incontinence** there are some things that you can do for yourself to control the leaking. For example, you can change what you eat and drink to help reduce irritation of the bladder, as explained in the previous section. You can also learn to control the bladder muscle better. This is called “bladder retraining.”

Urge suppression and bladder retraining

When your bladder muscle contracts, the urge to urinate is strong and uncomfortable. The common reaction is to rush to the bathroom as soon as possible. But you can retrain your bladder to wait, if you consciously try to suppress the urge.

The feeling of urgency comes in waves. It starts, grows, peaks and fades away. This can take a few minutes. When you feel the urge to urinate:

1. Stop what you are doing and **be still**.
2. Sit down and **squeeze** your pelvic floor muscles. This technique is referred to as “freeze and squeeze.”

3. Take a few deep breaths and **relax** your body and mind.
4. **Distract** your mind by counting backwards, saying the alphabet, reciting nursery rhymes etc.
5. When the urge subsides, calmly **walk to the toilet**.

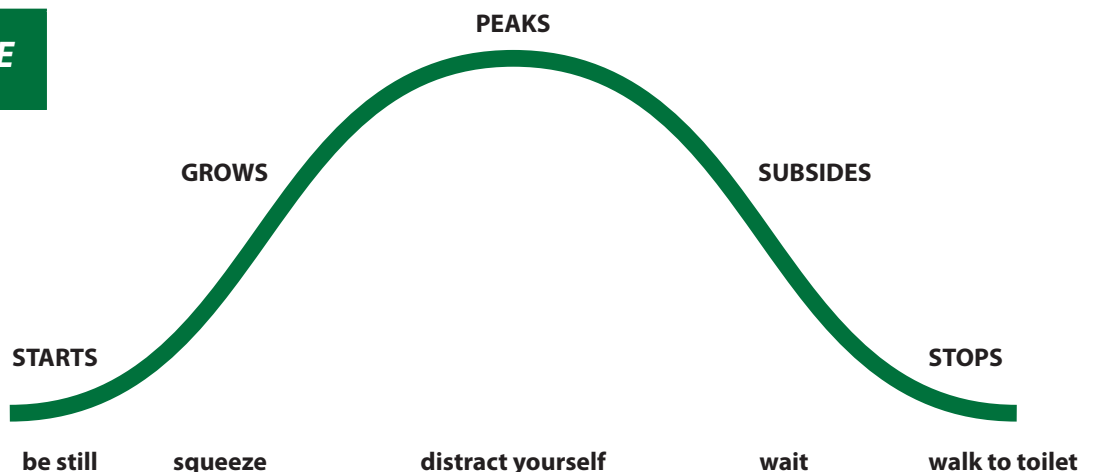
If you have common triggers for urge incontinence (e.g. hearing running water or putting your key in the door), you can use this technique to manage the urge and break the habit. Practice squeezing the muscles at the same time you are confronted with the trigger. With practice, urge suppression becomes easier and more successful.

Self care may stop you from leaking as often, but it probably will not stop the leaking completely. You may still wear pads, just in case.

USING INCONTINENCE PADS

If you wear pads all the time or most of the time, you should use a barrier cream to prevent irritation.

THE URGE CURVE



C. PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLE EXERCISES

Strong pelvic floor muscles give us control over our bladder and bowel, and support our organs in the pelvis. Strengthening the pelvic floor muscles can improve stress and urge incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse.

What is the pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor muscles stretch like a trampoline from the tailbone (coccyx) to the pubic bone (back to front) and from one sitting bone to the other (side to side). These muscles are normally firm and thick.

The bladder, uterus and bowel lie on top of the pelvic floor muscle layer. There are 3 openings in the pelvic floor layer for the urethra (the tube from the bladder), the vagina, and the anus (opening from the bowel) to pass through. The pelvic floor muscles normally wrap firmly around these openings to keep them closed. There is also an extra circular muscle around the anus (anal sphincter) and the urethra (urethral sphincter) to help with the closure.

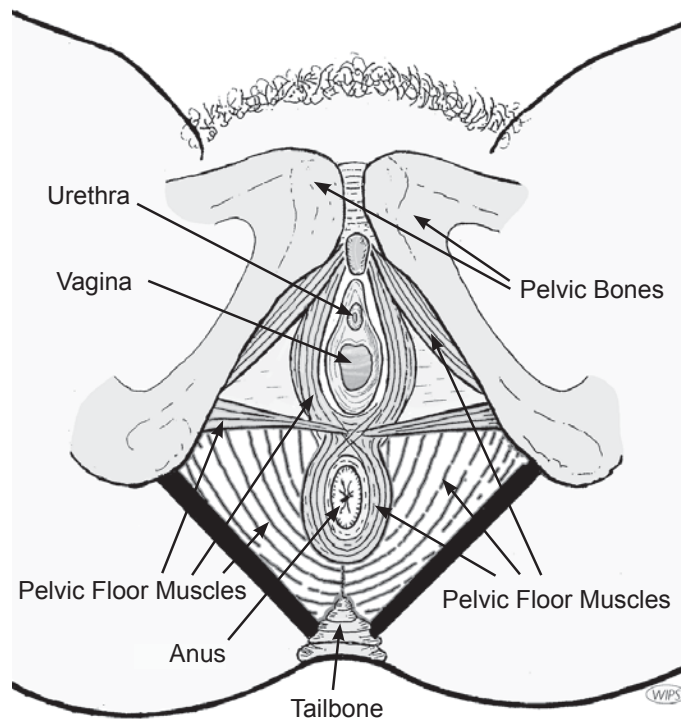
When the pelvic floor muscles are contracted, the pelvic organs are lifted and the sphincters tighten, closing the openings of the vagina, anus and urethra.

Pelvic floor exercises

Special exercises, sometimes called **Kegel exercises**, help to strengthen the muscles of the pelvic floor. You can do these exercises at home by yourself. Many women find that coaching from a specially trained physiotherapist helps them to learn the exercises properly and get them off to a good start.

Finding the right muscles:

Imagine that you are trying to stop your urine flow or are trying to hold back gas. You should feel your vagina and your anus tighten. Lie down and insert a clean, moist finger into the vagina. Tighten the pelvic floor muscles. You should feel a squeeze around your finger.



Doing the exercises:

1. Start by doing the exercises lying down with your knees bent.
2. Squeeze your pelvic floor muscles. Hold for 5-10 seconds. Relax for 10 seconds. Work your way up to repeating this exercise 5-10 times.
3. You may only be able to hold for a few seconds to start. That's okay. Start there and work your way up.
4. Repeat these exercises 2-3 times a day.
5. Challenge yourself! Do these exercises in sitting or standing positions, while you walk, sidestep or jump. Increase the repetitions and decrease the rest time.

If you are doing exercises yourself at home, here are some tips:

- Make sure that you are using the pelvic floor muscles only, not the legs or buttocks.
- Avoid holding your breath when doing these exercises.

Get the knack

Use the pelvic floor when you need it most. Squeeze before you cough, sneeze, laugh or lift something heavy. This is called "the knack."

Tips for remembering to sneak in a squeeze:

- Try to link your pelvic floor exercises with certain activities: morning and bedtime, watching television, waiting at red lights.
- Red dots: put stickers in places to remind you to do your exercises. For example, put one on the bathroom mirror, rearview mirror, bedside table or t.v.

Keep it up

Do the exercises regularly and don't give up! It may take three to six months to see full results. You may test your pelvic floor strength once a month by trying to stop your flow of urine, but **do not** do your exercises while you empty the bladder. That might confuse the bladder.

