

Healthy Habits for Your Bladder and Bowels



NORMAL BLADDER FUNCTION

An average bladder can hold about two cups of urine before it needs to be emptied. A person with a healthy bladder urinates (pees) an average of 6-8 times each day or once every 2-4 hours depending on fluid intake and climate. Most people pee more during the day and less or not at all when sleeping. As you age, bladder capacity can decrease, which means you might have to pee more often, but if you are healthy, not more than once every two hours or 1-2 times per night.

SEVEN HABITS TO MAINTAIN A HIGHLY EFFECTIVE BLADDER

1. **When you pee, don't strain or push.** Instead, rocking forwards and backward helps empty the bladder. Sit on the toilet and relax your pelvic floor muscles when you pee.
2. **Empty your bladder completely.** Retaining urine can allow bacteria to grow in the urinary tract and lead to urinary tract infections (UTI). UTIs can increase frequency and urgency, as well as cause pain and fever.
3. **Avoid "just in case" peeing.** Urinating more than every two hours sends a signal to your bladder that it should be emptied even before it is full.
4. **Don't ignore the urge to pee for too long.** "Too long" is generally considered more than four hours. This can be convenient but isn't healthy for your bladder. It may also signal you are dehydrated and not drinking enough water.
5. **Use your diet to control your bladder symptoms.** To help control urgency and frequency and decrease bladder pain if present, limit or eliminate these bladder irritants: alcoholic and carbonated beverages, artificial sweeteners, chocolate, caffeinated beverages, spicy foods and other highly acidic foods like tomatoes, citrus and vinegar
6. **Keep the skin around the urethra and vaginal opening clean and dry.** This can help decrease skin irritation caused by urine leakage. Use pads specifically designed for incontinence and a moisture barrier cream if irritation occurs. (Some examples are Bag Balm® or A and D ointment®). Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the best options.
7. **Perform pelvic floor (PF) exercises (Kegels).** Kegels can help with urinary stress incontinence –peeing when you laugh, cough or sneeze -- or with urinary urgency and frequency when the bladder is overactive. Over time, practicing routine Kegel exercises will help strengthen the pelvic floor muscles, which will decrease symptoms of stress incontinence. However, sometimes urinary urgency and pelvic pain conditions are caused by pelvic floor muscles that are too tight. In these cases, a reverse Kegel to release the PF muscles is helpful.

FIVE MYTHS ABOUT THE BLADDER

1. **Urinary frequency usually happens because of a small bladder.** In general, the size of your bladder is not the cause of urinary urgency and frequency. Common causes of urinary urgency are intake of bladder irritants, medications, your habits and pregnancy.
2. **Incontinence is just a normal part of having a baby or getting older.** Urine leakage is not an inevitable part of childbirth or aging, it can be common but not normal.
3. **Getting up more than once a night to pee is normal.** Urinating more than once a night is a condition called nocturia. Sometimes, people void at night just by habit. It can be a sign that your bladder needs retraining or medications need to be adjusted.
4. **There is nothing but surgery that can change urgency, frequency or stress incontinence symptoms.** Many non-surgical treatments have been shown to improve bladder function and health. Pelvic floor muscle training (Kegel exercise) has been shown to be very effective. Other treatments include pessaries, nerve or muscle stimulation, behavioral and dietary changes and medication.
5. **Being overweight has nothing to do with my bladder problems.** Being overweight can increase the stress on your bladder. This can contribute to stress incontinence. It can also put extra pressure on your organs.

BOWEL HEALTH TIPS

The normal bowel movement (BM) frequency ranges from 3 times per day to 3 times per week. Constipation can present as stools that are hard to pass, the time involved to pass stool or having fewer bowel movements than usual. Hemorrhoids occur when there is excessive straining with a BM.

- Your posture on the toilet makes a difference. Elevate your knees above your hips by placing your feet on a stool. Take a few deep breaths to help relax.
- Avoid excessive straining to have a BM– don't just hold your breath and push! First breath in then gently bulge your belly and keep your pelvic floor and anal muscles relaxed to help empty your bowels.
- Unlike the bladder, don't delay the urge to have a bowel movement.
- Encourage a healthy intake of water, fruits, vegetables and fiber – stay regular!
- Your pelvic physical therapist can be a great resource for additional education about abdominal massage, toileting positions and relaxing your pelvic floor muscles.