

A COMMON PROBLEM  
FOR MEN AND WOMEN

# Promoting Continence with Physiotherapy

This leaflet contains information about the physiotherapy advice and treatment for anyone with bladder and bowel problems.

This may be leakage of urine, wind or stool.

This kind of leakage is called incontinence.



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# Incontinence is a common problem

Incontinence can happen at any age with many people having a problem at some time in their lives. Most people with incontinence can be helped by physiotherapy. A specialist continence physiotherapist will help you to understand and manage your problem.

Incontinence can have many causes. Your specialist physiotherapist will talk to you about your incontinence. Together you can decide on the best treatment.

# Different types of leakage

## Stress incontinence

The most common type of leakage is stress incontinence. It is caused by a physical stress on your bladder that makes you leak. It often happens when you cough, sneeze or exercise. One of the causes of stress leakage is poor control of already weak pelvic floor muscles. Other problems such as constipation, a persistent cough, surgery, or being overweight may make it worse.

## Urge Incontinence

Urgency is the sudden desire to go to the toilet immediately and if you leak as you rush to the toilet you may have urge incontinence. Sometimes this leakage occurs with little or no warning. There are several reasons why this may happen. It may be because you have fallen into bad habits. It may also be due to an irritation inside your bladder, or because you have lost control of your bladder muscle. Urge incontinence can sometimes be caused by another medical problem such as multiple sclerosis or a stroke.

## Mixed Incontinence

If you have a combination of the above, then you are said to have mixed incontinence. Your specialist physiotherapist will help you to overcome your need to rush to the toilet whilst also helping you to get back control of your pelvic floor muscles.

## Anal Incontinence

This is leakage of stool (faeces) or difficulty with controlling wind. It may be caused by muscle weakness around the anus (back passage).

## Physiotherapy assessment

At your first appointment with your specialist physiotherapist, your problem will be fully assessed. It is important to find out about you, your lifestyle, any surgery you may have had, and any other existing medical problems you have, before you start your treatment. This assessment may take up to an hour.

Specialist physiotherapists understand how pelvic floor muscles work and how they contribute to the control of your bladder and bowel. So to check your muscles, your specialist physiotherapist will offer you an internal examination. This procedure will be explained to you. You will be asked to give your consent for the examination. Afterwards the results of your examination will be discussed with you. Some specialist physiotherapists use ultrasound scanning to see how your pelvic floor muscles work, and this may be part of your initial assessment as well.

## Physiotherapy treatment

Following this assessment, your specialist physiotherapist will talk to you about your problems. Together you can discuss the best treatment for you.

This may include exercises, urge control techniques, changes to your diet or fluids, and advice about your lifestyle. Successful treatment depends on you following the advice you are given. It can take 3 months or longer to improve the function of your pelvic floor muscles, however your leakage may start to get better before that.

## Bladder Diary

You may be asked to fill in a bladder diary for a few days. This requires you to record how much you drink and measure how much urine you pass, as well as the number of times you have a leak. This information helps your specialist physiotherapist to understand how your bladder is working.

## Improving the function of your pelvic floor muscles

### Pelvic floor muscle exercises

Your pelvic floor muscles contribute to bladder and bowel control, sexual responses, pelvic organ support (prevention of prolapse), and support of your pelvis and lower back. Physiotherapy treatments can help to reduce your leakage problem. Even if you already do pelvic floor muscle exercises, and have strong pelvic floor muscles, you may not be using them at the right time or in the right way to prevent leakage.

An internal examination and/or an ultrasound scan will ensure that you are doing your pelvic floor muscle exercises properly. Your specialist physiotherapist will talk to you about how well your muscles are working. You will need to do regular pelvic floor muscle training to improve your leakage. Together you can decide your training programme, and how often you need to exercise.

## Cones/Pelvic floor muscle exercisers

Some women use weighted cones. These are inserted into the vagina (like a tampon) to help exercise your pelvic floor muscles. You can hold them in while you do other things such as light housework. Your physiotherapist can help you to make sure that you are using them in the best possible way for you. You should always follow the instructions that come with the device if you have not been advised otherwise by your specialist physiotherapist. Cones/exercisers may not be suitable for every woman. They are not designed to be used by men.

## Electrical Stimulation

If you have difficulty working your pelvic floor muscles, or you experience urgency and urge incontinence, you may benefit from electrical stimulation. If it is used for stress incontinence, a small electrical current is passed through your pelvic floor muscles so that you feel these muscles tightening. If the treatment is used for

urgency and urge incontinence, the machine will be programmed to calm down the inappropriate sensations you are getting and you may not feel your muscles tightening. These treatments are safe.

## Biofeedback

This treatment involves using special equipment, which gives you information (feedback) about how well your muscles are working. Your specialist physiotherapist may offer biofeedback treatment to you if appropriate.

## Motivation

Research shows that if you are motivated, your treatment will be more successful. This means that you should agree your treatment programme with your specialist physiotherapist and decide to practise the exercises regularly at home. You should also follow any extra advice you are given.

## Helpful advice

### Drinking habits

You should aim to drink about 1 1/2 - 2 litres of fluid a day (about 3 - 4 pints). You may need to drink more during exercise, in hot weather, or if you are eating spicy or salty foods.

Caffeine may affect the number of times you need to go to the toilet. Your specialist physiotherapist might advise you to gradually

reduce the amount of caffeine you drink. Coffee, tea, green tea, cocoa, and cola all contain caffeine. Fizzy drinks have been found to affect some people too. It is a good idea to replace these drinks with water or herbal/fruit teas. It may also help to change to decaffeinated drinks

## Training your bladder

Bladder retraining will help to reduce frequency, urgency and urge incontinence. Your specialist physiotherapist can teach you how to control the sudden overwhelming urge to pass urine, stop you rushing to the toilet immediately, and take control of your bladder.

## Constipation

Straining to empty your bowels may stretch the supporting structures within your pelvic floor and also weaken the muscles. This may aggravate your leakage. You should try not to put off the urge to empty your bowel.

If you have constipation it may help to change your diet and lifestyle, even if you think you have a healthy diet anyway. Changing the way you sit on the toilet, and learning how to use your muscles better to empty your bowel will help as well. Your specialist physiotherapist can give you the necessary advice.

## Weight

Being overweight puts an extra strain on your pelvic floor muscles. Your leakage may improve if you lose weight.



## Lifting

Heavy lifting also puts a strain on your pelvic floor muscles. Try to avoid heavy or repetitive lifting whenever you can. With any lifting, try to tighten your pelvic floor muscles before and during the lift, and don't hold your breath.

## Exercise

High impact exercise puts pressure on your pelvic floor muscles. This may aggravate your leakage too. Sit-ups, if done incorrectly, can make you leak and will put extra strain on your pelvic floor muscles. Correct use of your 'core' muscles may improve the working of your pelvic floor muscles. Your specialist physiotherapist can advise you on the right activities for you.

## Smoking

**Telephone the NHS helpline**

**Smokefree 0800 0224332**

**[gosmokefree.nhs.uk](http://gosmokefree.nhs.uk)**

## Also

Some health problems may make it difficult for you to get to the toilet in time, or you may have difficulty undressing. Your treatment will include advice about improving access to the toilet, gentle mobility exercises, or suggesting alterations to clothing. Simple tricks can make it so much easier for you to prepare to empty your bladder or bowel.

If your ability to follow the advice in this leaflet is affected by any health problem or disability, contact your local specialist physiotherapist who will be able to assess you and offer specific alternatives, suitable for your needs.

## Finding a specialist continence physiotherapist

Many people with incontinence do not realise that simple treatments will help. Specialist physiotherapy can help you to control your leakage, and improve your quality of life. To find your nearest specialist continence physiotherapist ask your local physiotherapy department or contact:

**POGP Administration,  
Fitwise Management Ltd,  
Blackburn House,  
Redhouse Rd,  
Seafield,  
Bathgate,  
West Lothian  
EH47 7AQ**

**T: 01506 811077 E: [info@fitwise.co.uk](mailto:info@fitwise.co.uk)  
or visit the POGP website at [pogp.csp.org.uk](http://pogp.csp.org.uk)**





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