

The Continence and Support Center

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BLADDER TRAINING FOR URINARY INCONTINENCE

What is Bladder Training?

Bladder training involves following a strict schedule for bathroom visits. The schedule starts with bathroom visits every 2 hours or so, but the time between visits gradually increases. The longer stretch of time between bathroom visits gives you increased bladder control and independence.

If you have a habit of using the bathroom more than once every 2 hours due to urgency- with or without incontinence- you may benefit from bladder training. Bladder training has been shown to be effective for both stress and urge incontinence.

What Are the Goals of Bladder Training?

Bladder training has several goals. It helps you to....

- Lengthen the amount of time between bathroom visits
- Increase the amount of urine that the bladder can comfortably hold
- Improve self-control over bladder urges by voiding on a schedule, not when the urge strikes
- Reduce or eliminate incontinence
- Increase independence in bladder management

How Do You Train Your Bladder?

Bladder training requires motivation for starting and maintaining a schedule for voids. Each week, as incontinence decreases, the schedule is changed slightly so your bathroom visits occur less often. Bladder training will take between 6 to 8 weeks for success, but noticeable improvements will occur early in the program. The Bladder Diary is used as a starting point. Record your bathroom visits and urine leaks on the Bladder Diary for 1 week. Measure the urine you produce during bathroom visits with a calibrated cup. This will help determine the amount of urine your bladder is able to hold. Review the Bladder Diary with your doctor, who will set a bladder training schedule based on the amount of time between your usual bathroom visits. For many people, the bathroom visits are scheduled for every hour.

For the first week, use the bathroom strictly according to the schedule. If a strong bladder urge strikes, use the Bladder Control Procedure (below) to regain control and wait until the next scheduled time to void. If the urge is too strong and it cannot be suppressed, then use the bathroom, but then resume the bladder schedule.

Each week, the time between bathrooms visits is increased by 15 to 30 minutes, as tolerated. As incontinence decreases week by week, the schedule can be further increased by 15 to 30 minutes. For many individuals, bathroom visits every 3 to 6 hours is desirable. For older persons, every 2 to 3 hours is optimal.

Monitor the number of urine leaks each day and for the entire week. Also monitor the amount of each leak. For example, a person may have 2 leaks a day, but instead of large leaks that saturate a pad, they are small dribbles that slightly dampen the pad. This is considered a good improvement.

If the number of urine leaks does not lessen in 1 week, then maintain the same bladder-training schedule for another week. Adjust the schedule in the next week when urine leaks decrease.

What is the Bladder Urge Control Procedure?

When a bladder urge strikes, you may be tempted to rush to the bathroom to prevent incontinence. This response can cause more harm than good, since the already active bladder becomes more stimulated and irritated with the rushed movement to the toilet.

To get control over the bladder, practice the Bladder Urge Control Procedure when the urge strikes. In this procedure you...

- Stand quietly or sit still. This prevents over-stimulation of the bladder.
- Take slow, relaxed breaths.
- Contract the pelvic floor muscles repeatedly. This helps keep the urethra closed to prevent urine from leaking. This also calms the bladder through special signals that are carried to the brain.
- Concentrate on making the urge go away. Use mental imagery and self-talk to help suppress the urge. Think to yourself, "I am in control of my bladder and this bladder has one job only and that is to hold urine until I am ready to go to the toilet."
- Use mental distraction to reduce the awareness of the discomfort of the urge. Hum a tune, do mathematical calculations (subtract 7 from 100, then continue subtracting 7), or balance the checkbook
- When the urge subsides, do not use the toilet until the next scheduled void. When used with every urge, this procedure becomes more effective and gives you greater control over your bladder.
- Use a clock, wristwatch alarm, or kitchen timer to remind you of the next bathroom visit.
- Drink water and other fluids as usual. Do not restrict fluids. Avoid foods or beverages with caffeine.
- Keep your Bladder Diary handy. Carry it with you when you go out so you can record bathroom visits and urine leaks.
- Practice pelvic muscle exercises on a regular basis. Strong pelvic muscles are necessary for bladder control. Use these muscles during the Urge Control Procedure to reduce bladder urgency and to prevent urine leaks.

Be encouraged by even small improvements in your symptoms. Although progress may seem slow, you are developing entirely new habits for your bladder control. These healthy bladder habits will remain an important part of your lifestyle. This takes both time and patience, but the rewards are worth the effort.