

Bladder Control

- How the bladder works
- Common bladder problems
- Exercises to help you gain control

If you find it hard to control your bladder, you are not alone. Many women experience loss of bladder control at some point during their lives. The most common times are just after having a baby and following menopause. It is also common for women to leak urine during exercise. The tips in this booklet are easy to follow and can help.

How does the bladder work?

The bladder control system is made up of several parts that work together for good bladder control. Good bladder control means you only urinate when you want to.

Most of the bladder control system lies inside the pelvis. Muscles in the floor of the pelvis need to be strong and tight to hold up the bladder, a muscular, balloon-shaped sac that stores urine and eliminates it from the body. Urine exits the bladder and body through a tube called the urethra. Muscles surrounding the urethra, called sphincter muscles, squeeze tight to keep it closed. Some of these muscles are voluntary muscles and are under your control. Others, like the bladder muscle, are involuntary muscles and not under your direct control.

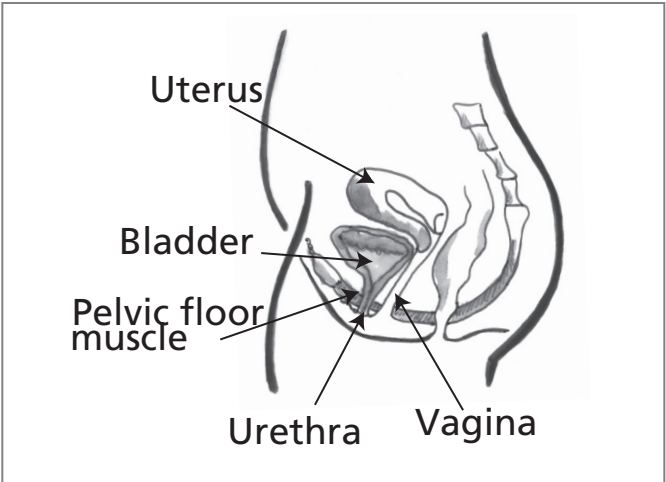
When your bladder is storing urine, the muscles of your bladder should stay relaxed. Your sphincter muscles and the pelvic floor muscles work together to keep the urethra closed. This allows urine to be held in your bladder.

When your bladder is ready to release urine, nerves in your bladder signal your brain. Your brain sends a message to your sphincter and pelvic floor muscles telling them to relax. Your bladder will then automatically contract. This automatic contraction is a reflex, but you can learn to control it.

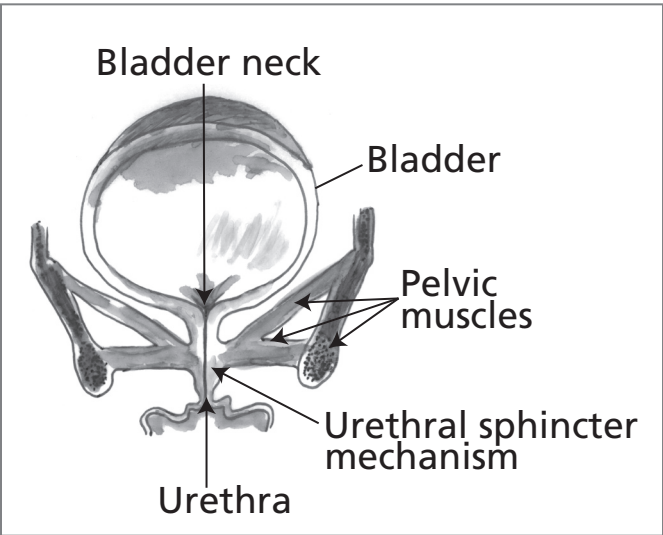
It is like the knee jerk reflex. You can not prevent the reflex when your knee tendon is hit, but you can control your leg's response to the reflex. While you cannot directly control the contraction of your bladder, you can learn to control how the muscles of your sphincter and pelvic floor respond to it.

Female Lower Urinary Organs

Side view



Front view



What kinds of bladder control problems are there?

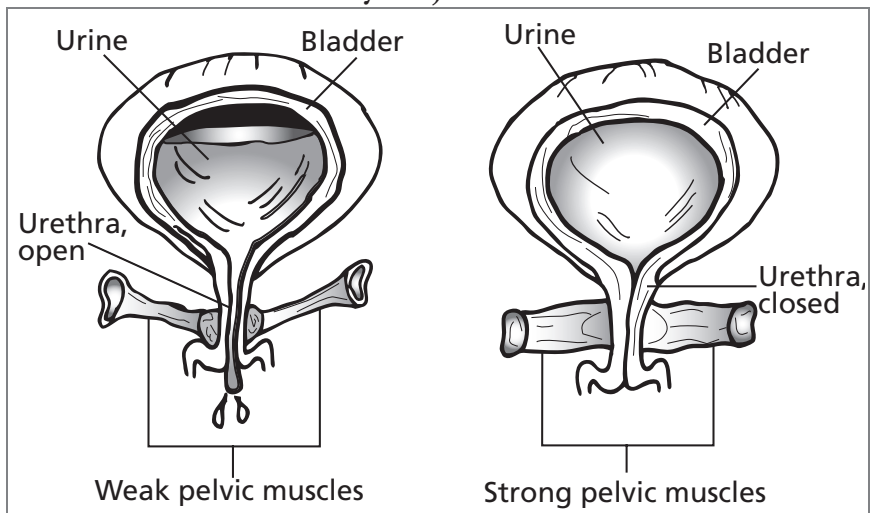
Most bladder control problems, known as urinary incontinence, happen when the muscles around the bladder are too weak or the bladder muscle is overactive.

Problems can also occur when the nerve signals that control the muscles don't work the way they should. Urinary incontinence can also be caused by the bladder reflex not working properly.

Stress incontinence is the most common type of bladder control problem. It is caused by weak pelvic floor or sphincter muscles.

Signs of stress incontinence include leaking urine when you:

- Cough, sneeze, or laugh.
- Walk or run.
- Exercise or lift heavy objects.



Doing pelvic floor exercises, known as Kegel exercises, will help you strengthen your pelvic floor and sphincter muscles so that you can voluntarily tighten them to prevent loss of urine. A combination of Kegel exercises and bladder training can improve your bladder control and help relieve stress incontinence.

Urge incontinence occurs when your bladder muscles are overactive and have uncontrolled contractions. With urge incontinence, you might have a strong, sudden urge to go to the bathroom, even when your bladder isn't full.

Several things can make your bladder too active, such as:

- A vaginal or urinary infection.
- Drinks that contain caffeine or alcohol.
- Spicy food that irritates your bladder.

Bladder training, Kegel exercises, and reducing bladder irritants, such as coffee, can help you improve bladder control and reduce urge incontinence. If you think you have a vaginal or urinary infection, talk to your health care provider about treatment.

It is not uncommon to have signs of both stress incontinence and urge incontinence. This is called **mixed incontinence**. A combination of Kegel exercises and bladder training should help.

How do I learn what my bladder problems are?

Keep a diary. Your bladder diary will show you what type of incontinence you have and help you better control your bladder.

Write down the following:

- When you go to the bathroom (what time).
- The amount of urine there is—small (about 2 tablespoons), medium (up to a cup), or large (1 cup or more).
- What you are doing when you leak urine (for example exercising, coughing or sneezing, or hearing water run).
- How much and what you drink each day.

Ask your health care provider to review your diary with you if you need help. For a free bladder diary call the Group Health Resource Line toll-free 1-800-992-2279 or e-mail resource.l@ghc.org.

How can I improve my bladder control?

There are two things you can do to help strengthen your bladder's ability to store and release urine. By using both methods you will gain better bladder control.

- **Kegel exercises** to strengthen your muscles and get them under better voluntary control to help relieve stress incontinence.
- **Bladder training** to help reduce uncontrolled contractions and relieve urge incontinence.

How do I do Kegel (pelvic floor muscle) exercises?

First you need to find the right muscles.

There are 3 ways to find them:

1. Try to stop the flow of urine when you are sitting on the toilet. If you can do it, you are using the right muscles. **(Note: Do not do this as a routine exercise. Use this as a test only.)**
2. Imagine that you are trying to stop passing gas. Squeeze the muscles you would use. If you have a “pulling” feeling, those are the right muscles.
3. Lie down and put your finger inside your vagina. Squeeze as if you were trying to stop urine from coming out. If you feel tightness on your finger, you are using the right muscles.

After you know where your pelvic floor muscles are, find a quiet spot to practice. Use only the pelvic floor muscles. Be careful not to tighten your stomach, legs, or other muscles. Don't hold your breath.

1. Pull the pelvic muscles in and hold for a count of 3.
2. Relax for a count of 3.
3. Try to repeat this 10 to 15 times each time you exercise.

Stop when your muscles are tired.

Work up to doing a total of 80 to 100 contractions a day.

4. When you can do the contractions 10 to 15 times without getting tired, slowly increase the amount of time you hold each contraction. Aim for holding to a count of 10 and then relaxing for 10.

Do these exercises at different times throughout the day, while sitting, standing, and lying down. When you're able to contract these muscles, tighten them when you feel like you're going to cough, or when you're laughing, or doing any other activity that has caused you to leak urine in the past. Be patient. It will take between 3 and 6 weeks before you notice a change.

If you don't get better, or you have questions about whether you are doing these exercises the right way, talk to a member of your health care team.

How do I train my bladder?

You don't want your bladder to get used to being emptied often, or being on any schedule other than your own.

Here are some things that will help your bladder hold more urine and contract less often:

- Wait 2 to 3 hours between the times you empty your bladder. Try not to empty your bladder more often than that. You might not be able to wait that long at first, but you can build up your bladder muscles slowly by following these tips.
- Use your bladder diary. See how much time there is between trips to the bathroom.
- If it's been less than 2 hours since you last urinated, try to wait at least another 5 minutes before going again.
- Do Kegel exercises while you wait.
- Add an additional 5 to 15 minutes each week until you can wait 2 to 3 hours between urination. Teaching your bladder muscle to relax will reduce your urge to urinate and lower your chance of leaking urine.

When you have the urge to urinate:

- Stop. Don't rush to the bathroom in a panic. Take a moment to let the urge pass.
- Do Kegel exercises to keep from leaking urine and help the bladder muscle relax.
- Let the bladder muscle relax and the urge will pass.
- Take some slow breaths.

How much liquid *should* I drink?

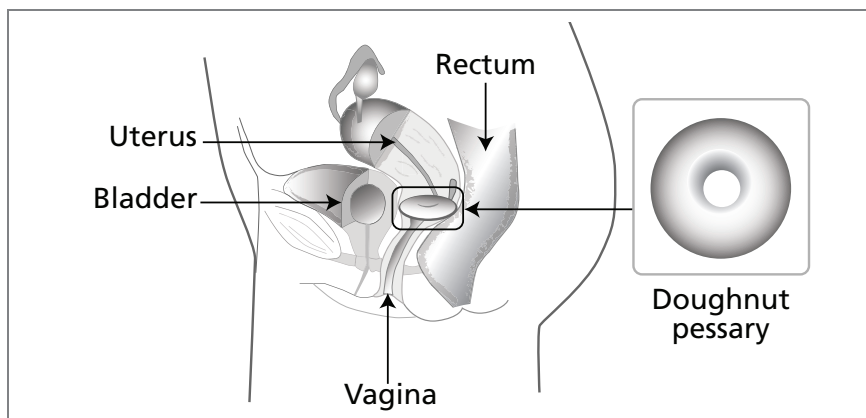
- Drink 7 to 8 cups of water and other liquids each day. You will know you're getting enough liquid if your urine is pale or colorless with no odor.
- Be sure to drink fluid throughout the day.
- Drink less before you go out or before you go to bed.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol. They can irritate your bladder once in a while. For those times, there are products you can use to make you feel more comfortable.

If I still have problems after trying bladder training and Kegel exercises, what other options do I have?

There are medicines that can calm overactive bladder muscles. There are side effects with these medicines, including dry eyes, dry mouth, and constipation. If you take medicine to treat an overactive bladder, you may need to take steps to help with these side effects.

A vaginal pessary is a removable plastic or rubber device inserted into the vagina to help with stress incontinence. It supports the walls of the vagina and lifts the bladder and urethra. Pessaries come in different shapes and sizes. Your provider can fit you with the best one and show you how to use it.

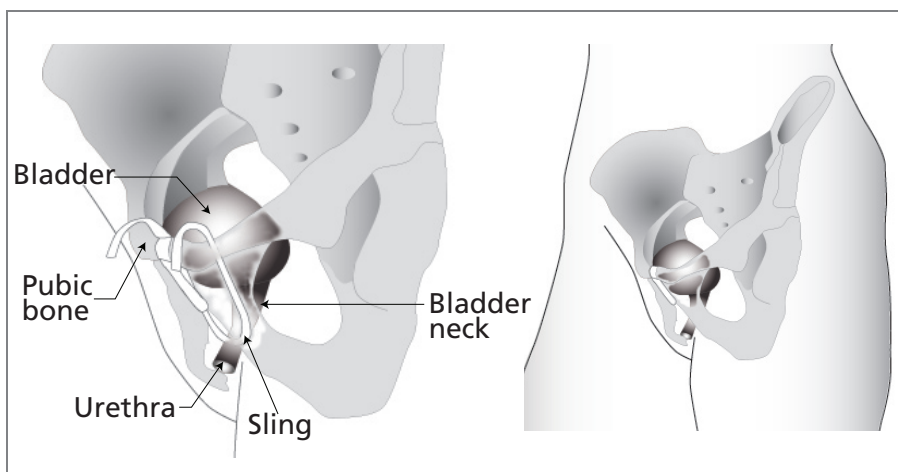
If you use a pessary, you should see your provider regularly to check for any small scrapes or infections that can happen when using this device.



Surgery can improve bladder support and sphincter control to help with stress incontinence. Usually the surgeon uses a sling or web to hold up the bottom of the bladder and top of the urethra to stop leakage.

Surgery for urge incontinence rarely helps. Sometimes an enlarged uterus can cause incontinence and removing it might help.

Your health care provider can help you decide if any of these options are right for you.



Surgery to lift the bladder may use a web or sling to support the bladder neck and urethra.

Incontinence products

To prevent urine from irritating your skin and causing skin problems:

- Use products made for urine leaking (not menstrual pads).
- Change the product often.
- Drink plenty of water to dilute your urine.
- Wash the area with water and pat dry or blow-dry with your hair dryer on a cool setting.
- Use an ointment (Desitin®, A & D Ointment or Bag Balm, for example) to protect your skin if you are always wet or your skin is irritated.

To help control odor:

- Use products meant for urine leaking.
- Drink plenty of water to dilute your urine.
- Avoid foods that give your urine a strong odor (asparagus, for example).
- Call your health care provider if you have a strong urine odor and signs of a urinary or vaginal infection.
- Use special sprays to neutralize urine odor, if needed.

Where can I get more information?

The Kaiser Permanente Resource Line can send you a free bladder control diary. Call weekdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. toll-free 1-800-992-2279, or by e-mail at resource.l@ghc.org.

Visit our website at kp.org/wa for more information on urinary incontinence as well as hundreds of other health topics.

Coverage may vary by plan. For benefits, refer to your coverage agreement or contact Member Services at 1-888-901-4636

