

Urinary incontinence in older adults

Exercises and treatments



Involuntary urine leakage affects one in five older adults. This fact sheet explains what can cause this problem and talks about the many options for dealing with it.

What causes incontinence in older adults?

This problem affects both men and women. It can be caused by different health problems:

- weakening of the muscles used to hold in urine (pelvic floor muscles)
- an operation
- an injury
- an illness (stroke, diabetes, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's)

Other possible causes are:

- medications: anti-depressants, sedatives, diuretics (that cause urination), etc.
- beverages (alcohol, coffee, tea, chocolate, etc.)
- foods (citrus fruit, spicy foods, etc.)

Other factors can also be part of the problem:

- constipation
- urinary infection

Incontinence is not related to normal aging. You should not accept being told that "This is normal at your age."

What impacts can incontinence have?

There are many, and they can be serious. They include, for example:

- reduced autonomy
- lower self-esteem
- a more limited social life
- a reduction in sexual activity

These impacts can lead to:

- shame
- isolation
- depression

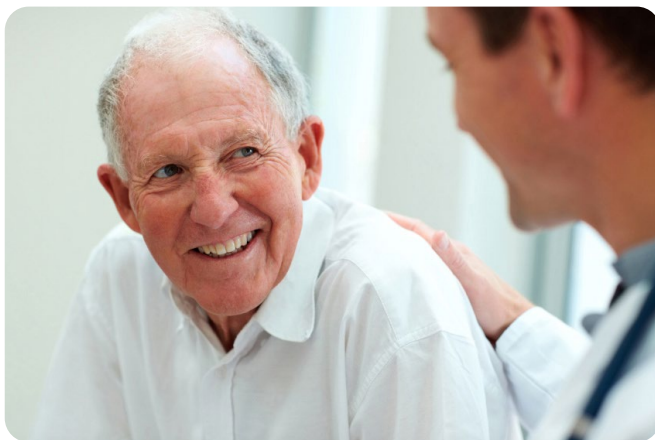


What are the different types of incontinence?

- > **Stress incontinence.** Involuntary urine loss on exertion, or when coughing, sneezing, or laughing. This often involves only a few drops at a time or a stream.
- > **Urge incontinence.** Leakage due to a pressing urge to urinate. Generally, these are larger leaks.
- > **Mixed incontinence.** A combination of urge and stress incontinence. This is the most common type in older adults.
- > **Overflow incontinence.** Urine leakage associated with an overly full, distended bladder. This can produce either drips or a continuous flow. This type is more common in men with prostate problems.
- > **Functional incontinence.** Urine leaks that occur when the person is unable to get to the toilet in time because of pain, weakness, or cognitive problems.

Can incontinence be treated?

Yes. See a doctor, nurse or physiotherapist to have the problem assessed. They can propose a set of treatments.



What are the main treatments?

- > **Pelvic strengthening exercises.**
 - There are exercises you can do while lying in bed or sitting in a chair. They are described in the following health fact sheets (French only):
 - [Prévenir et traiter l'incontinence urinaire chez la femme.](#)
 - [Prévenir et traiter l'incontinence urinaire chez l'homme.](#)

You can also do exercises adapted for older adults. See the Appendix on page 4.



These exercises are known to be very effective. For best results, they should be done 5 times a week for at least 8 weeks. Then, if your condition is satisfactory, they should be done 3 times a week to prevent a recurrence of the problem.

If exercises are not enough, there are other solutions. A physiotherapist can give you a complete check-up and then recommend a treatment that is more suited to your situation. Your family doctor or specialist at the CHUM can tell you about other possible treatments, as appropriate.

- > **Bladder rehabilitation and techniques to suppress intense urges.** This can be done using a calendar. See the fact sheet [Vérier comment vous urinez à l'aide d'un calendrier - Le calendrier mictionnel](#) (French only).

> **Diet.** You can reduce the need to urinate by limiting the use of bladder irritants, such as alcohol, fake sugars (e.g. sweeteners such as aspartame), and caffeine. For a more complete list, and to know what to replace these foods with, see the fact sheet [Avoir du mal à contrôler son envie d'uriner - La vessie hyperactive](#). (French only).



Drink enough water (2 litres per day) and eat foods high in fibre to help fight constipation. See the health fact sheet [Des moyens pour combattre la constipation](#). (French only). Avoid drinking 3 hours before going to bed.

Contrary to what many believe, drinking less does not necessarily reduce urine leakage. Rather, it causes a concentration of urine that can irritate the bladder and increase your urge to urinate.

- > **A suitable environment.** To be able to urinate more easily:
 - make your toilets more easily accessible
 - install a higher toilet seat and support bars in the bathroom
 - put a commode chair in the bedroom, very useful at night
 - wear clothes that are easy to take off
- > **Leak protection (as needed).** If you need to wear protection, use products specifically designed for urine leakage. Avoid these if your incidents are rare.

Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

The doctor or professional who is in charge of your care will be able to answer you best.

If you are advised to see a physiotherapist, choose one who is registered with the Ordre professionnel de la physiothérapie du Québec.



USEFUL RESOURCES

To find a physiotherapist:
Ordre professionnel de la physiothérapie du Québec:
> oppq.qc.ca
or ask for advice at your CLSC.

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our website chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante



Questions

The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

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Do these exercises to strengthen your pelvic floor and to have more control over your urination.



Before doing the exercise

Try to stop the stream while you are urinating. Note the muscles you use to do that. These are the pelvic muscles, the ones you need to work on.

Caution! Don't do this repeatedly. This could, among other things, increase the risk of having a urinary tract infection.

EXERCISE



- Lie in bed with your knees bent or sit in a chair. Tighten the pelvic muscles as if to hold in urine or gas for 5 to 10 seconds. You should feel them contract upwards. Then, release.

- Breathe normally during the exercise. Don't tighten your stomach, buttocks, or thighs.

- Do the exercise (contraction and release) 10 times.
- Repeat this exercise 1 to 3 times per day.
- Once you have good control of the contraction, start doing it during your daily activities (getting up, walking, etc.).

OTHER USEFUL EXERCISES

Staying fit helps to keep your muscles, including your pelvic floor muscles, toned. Here are some simple examples:

- Walking 20 minutes a day.
- Sitting in a straight-backed chair and getting up, 10 times in a row.
- Doing Tai Chi.



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