

# Bladder Retraining

## Information for Patients

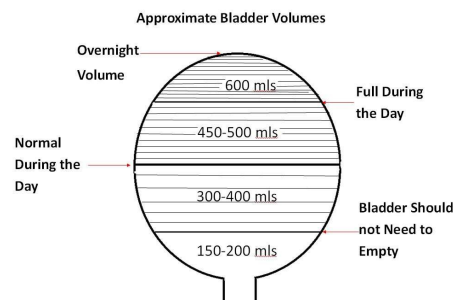
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### Why do I need to train my bladder?

Symptoms like frequency (emptying too often), urgency (feeling urgent to go) or urge incontinence (leaking urine before reaching the toilet) mean that the bladder is not working as it should. There are many causes for these symptoms, but bladder training can help to improve things.

### How does the bladder work?

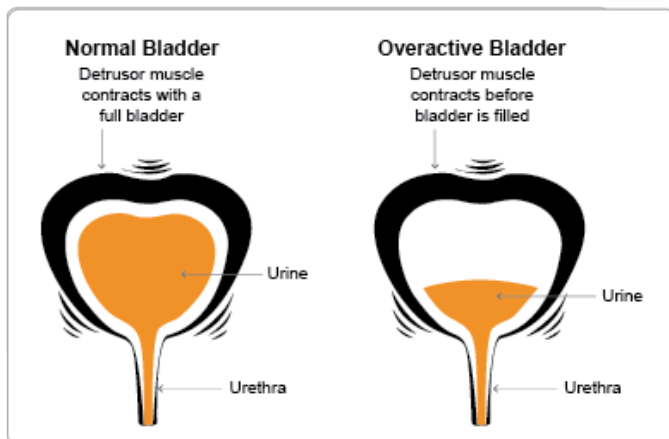
Urine is collected and stored in the bladder, which should be relaxed when filling and contract when emptying. As the bladder fills, a message is sent to the brain, which in turn sends a message back to the bladder to either tell it to empty or store the urine.



Our bladder normally gives us the first warning signal it is filling when it is about a third full (approx. 150mls), we should be able to ignore this and we may not even notice this warning if we are busy. We usually get a second message that the bladder is filling when it is about half full (approx. 250-300mls), this is when most people would head to the toilet to urinate if it was appropriate to do so. After this point we get more regular warning signals that our bladder is filling and it becomes harder to ignore, but often we can continue to hold until approx. 400 – 600mls if needed. However, if any part of the system is not working properly there may be sudden urgency that cannot be ignored, frequent urination and / or involuntary leakage of urine. To help improve these symptoms, the bladder can be re-trained.

### What is Bladder Retraining?

Bladder retraining involves gradually increasing the amount of fluid the bladder can hold and giving you confidence in your bladder so you can go about daily life. Instead of going to the toilet as soon as you get the desire to, you should set yourself a target to wait before each time you pass urine. At first this may be difficult and you may only be able to hold 2-3 minutes, but persist and it should improve. Slowly increase the period you can hold urine for from 2 minutes in small intervals upwards until you can manage to hold for 20 to 30 minutes.



During the time you are putting off going to the toilet you are learning how to suppress bladder contractions. By filling the bladder with more urine its' wall is being stretched and so will hold more. Set yourself a higher target bladder capacity to aim for each week or so. You can monitor this by occasionally repeating your bladder diary.

Avoid going to the toilet 'just in case.' This encourages your bladder to hold only small volumes. You should only empty the bladder when it is full and you have done your 'hold-on' exercise or up to 3 hours since the last toilet trip.

Often people start to see improvements in weeks but it can take months to see the full effects. You will have good and bad days but consistency is key to see changes over time, so you should practice this for every time you need to wee or as many as reasonably possible. You can learn to suppress and ignore bladder contractions using some of the techniques listed below.

### Tips for holding on:



- Sit on a hard seat, rolled towel or over the arm of a chair
- Hold over the perineum or place pressure on the back of legs by perching against something / sitting down
- Gently contract your pelvic floor muscles as short strong contractions or hold gently for 10 - 20 seconds
- While standing, go up and down on your toes
- Curl your toes up and relax repeatedly
- Cross your legs

- Distract yourself, e.g. recite the alphabet backwards, count backwards from 60, make a list, send a text message
- Stand or sit still for 10 – 20 seconds before calmly walking to the toilet.
- Keep calm and relaxed. Concentrate on calm and relaxed breathing and focus on exhaling to release pressure.
- Standing tall can help, looking up and not curling over to hold the bladder can help increase your pelvic floor tension and help you to hold longer.

*To do list...*

Z - A

60, 59, 58...

## How much should I drink?

Most people require between 1.5 – 2 litres of fluid in total per day. Drinking too much or too little can irritate the bladder and cause the feeling of needing to go to the toilet more frequently. Although it seems to make sense that if we drink less fluid we would also pass urine less often, this is not always the case. The bladder prefers to hold less concentrated urine, so drinking less often results in acidic urine that irritates the bladder lining causing an increase in urgency.

**You should aim to drink about 1.5-2 litres of fluid a day** (around 6 - 8 cups or glasses).

- Try to spread it evenly throughout the day
- Try to stop drinking 2 hours before bed (particularly if you are waking in the night to pass urine)
- Consider cutting down on items which may irritate your bladder. We have listed the fluids that can irritate your bladder and some good alternatives below.

### Bladder Irritants:

- Tea / coffee / green tea / hot chocolate
- Fizzy drinks
- Energy drinks
- Citrus fruit juice: orange / grapefruit
- Alcohol: beer / spirits with fizzy mixers / wine
- Low sugar / diet drinks
- Acidic food i.e. tomatoes, oranges


### Replacement Drinks:

- Water
- Fruit squash diluted with water
- Cranberry juice (not if on warfarin)
- Barley water
- Fruit, herbal, peppermint teas
- Decaffeinated tea / coffee
- Bovril / broth / soup including 'cup a soup'



## Should I go to the toilet more often?

It is tempting to do this, but you should avoid emptying your bladder 'just in case'. Unfortunately rather than helping the problem this can make things worse as the bladder gets used to holding less urine. The bladder then becomes more sensitive even when there is very little urine in it to stretch it.



A 'normal' bladder will need to empty 5-8 times over a 24 hour period (roughly every 2-3 hours), if we drink a regular amount. It is normal to want to go a couple of times when we first wake, and then to have longer periods between emptying as the day goes on.

If your bladder wakes you a lot at night, stop drinking fluids at least 2 hours before bed time.

## Tips to help you fully empty your bladder

It is important to give yourself time for the bladder to empty properly. ALWAYS sit on the seat of the toilet, and relax to empty your bladder (even on a public toilet). Your bladder cannot empty properly if you are not seated and relaxed.

### How to help your bladder empty


- Sit comfortably (leaning forward slightly) so your pelvic floor muscles are relaxed; this is for both male and females. Pelvic flow is often improved if sitting.
- 'Double void' i.e. rock back & forth / stand up, 'wiggle', sit down and try again
- Gentle tapping or pressure just above your pubic bone (x 7-8 times with a few seconds rest between each)
- Rocking backwards and forwards, gently contract your pelvic floor muscles and then let go as you lean forward
- Turn on a tap – the sound of running water can help
- Gentle blowing out or whistling
- Pour a jug/cup of warm water over your vaginal area
- Gently pull some pubic hair or stroke your lower back


## What if I can't hold on?

It is often difficult to hold on just as the toilet is in sight – avoid rushing to get your underwear off or opening your buttons on the way. This encourages your bladder to empty without permission, and will only get worse.

Instead, whilst walking to the toilet if the urgency increases you should stop walking, take calm deep breaths and try some of the 'tips for holding on' suggested in this leaflet until the urgency reduces and you feel able to begin walking calmly to the toilet again. Repeat this as often as needed to keep control on the way to the toilet.

Plenty of people find that their bladder wants to empty as soon as they put their key in the front door. This is a well-recognised symptom, and is called '**latchkey incontinence**'. It is just a more extreme version of the bathroom urgency – your brain is telling the bladder that you are 'almost there', and the bladder responds as though it has been given permission to empty.





Anticipate that this may happen. Tell yourself to slow right down and keep still. Do not put the key in the door until the urge has gone away, then do everything with exaggerated slowness. The more you practice this, the better you will get at it, but you must do it EVERY time.

Some people find that they get a strong urge when they stand up after sitting down for a while. This is because the back of the thighs have sensory nerves that help to inhibit the bladder and stop it emptying, and the pressure of the chair has stimulated these. If this is a problem for you, use your finger tips to rub the back of your thighs as you stand, then keep doing this until the urge wears off.

Always remember – as well as being influenced by muscles and nerves, your bladder is very much under the control of your brain. **It is important that you tell it what to do, and be consistent.**

### **Is there anything else that can help?**

Maintaining a **healthy body weight** will help with bladder symptoms. If you are overweight, even losing just a few kilos can make a big impact.

**Giving up smoking** can help. Nicotine is a bladder irritant, so can make symptoms worse. Smoking also tends to cause a frequent cough, which adds to the strain on the pelvic floor muscles.

**Avoid constipation.** A full bowel will put pressure on the bladder, and straining to empty the bowel weakens the pelvic floor.

**Medication** can help with these symptoms, however some people find the side effects are difficult, and they need to be taken consistently for a long period of time. Your GP can prescribe this medication if they feel it will help. If you choose to take it, it is still important to follow all this advice, as medication can ease the sensations and urgency, but will not necessarily 'retrain' the bladder into good habits – only you can do this.

