

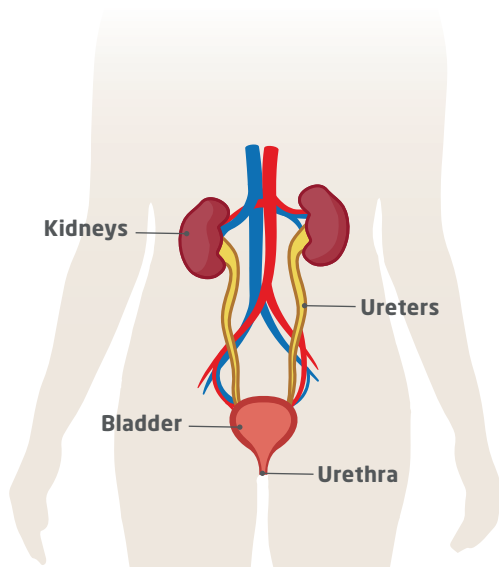
Managing Overactive Bladder

Overactive bladder is a common condition that affects people of all ages. Many things can cause the symptoms. There are ways you can manage the symptoms so you can get back to enjoying work, exercise and time with your family and friends. This handout will give you information about overactive bladder and what you can do to help manage it.

Bladder function

The bladder is an organ in your lower pelvis that holds urine (Figure 1).

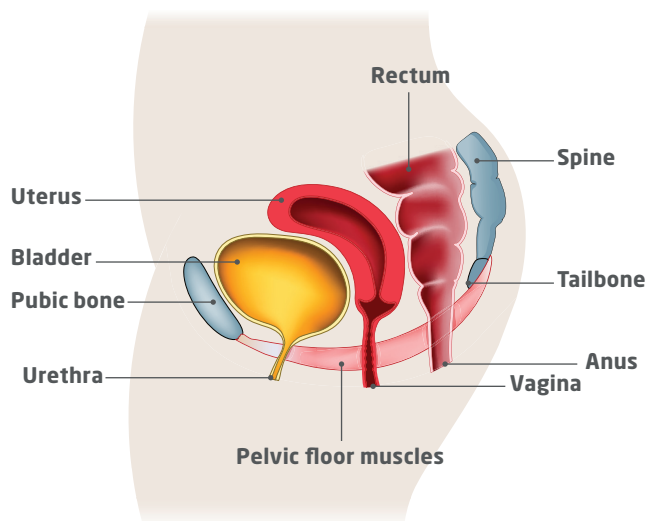
Figure 1. Urinary system



The kidneys filter fluids from the foods you eat and drink to make urine. Small tubes known as ureters drain the urine from the kidneys to the bladder. When the bladder is close to being full, it sends a message to your brain that you need to urinate (pee).

The pelvic muscles sit like a hammock at the bottom of the pelvis and help support the bladder. They also help keep the bladder from leaking or emptying when you are not yet ready to urinate. When you are ready to urinate and sit down on the toilet, your pelvic muscles relax and send a signal to the bladder to empty. The exact causes of overactive bladder are not clearly known. It may be that messages from the brain, pelvic muscles and bladder get mixed up.

Figure 2. Pelvic muscles and organs



Managing Overactive Bladder (continued)

Symptoms of an overactive bladder

Symptoms of an overactive bladder include these:

Waking up more than 2 times at night to urinate

Leaking urine on the way to the bathroom

Feeling a very strong urge to urinate

Urinating more than every 1 to 2 hours or 8 times per day

Conditions that may lead to an overactive bladder

Some health conditions can affect your bladder. These conditions can make you urinate often or at night, or feel you need to urinate right away:

- Diabetes
- Hypertension (high blood pressure)
- Neurologic conditions such stroke, multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injury and Parkinson's disease
- Medications
 - Diuretics (water pills)
 - Blood pressure medications
 - Antipsychotic, antidepressant or mood stabilizing medications
 - Antihistamines (allergy medications)

If you have symptoms of an overactive bladder, see your physician or healthcare professional. They may test you for a urinary tract or kidney infection. They may screen you for the conditions listed above. There also may be other reasons you have symptoms.

Managing an overactive bladder

If your physician or healthcare professional diagnoses you with an overactive bladder, they may refer you to a pelvic health physical therapist (PHPT). A PHPT is a physical therapist who specializes in treating many problems related to the pelvis. They commonly treat people with an overactive bladder.

The PHPT will work with you on ways to manage your overactive bladder. Here are some things you can do to try to manage your overactive bladder before you start physical therapy or if you are not able to attend regular sessions.

Drink fluids.

Ask your physician or healthcare professional how much water you should be drinking. On average, healthy adults should drink 48 to 64 ounces of fluids per day. Many people stop drinking fluids if they have bladder leaks, but concentrated urine can irritate the bladder.

Follow these tips:

Cut down on caffeine drinks such as tea, coffee and some sodas.

Limit carbonated drinks such as bubbly or sparkling drinks, or sodas/pop.

Drink less alcohol.

See if chocolate, citrus fruits (lemons, limes or oranges) or spicy foods affect your bladder.

All of these can irritate the bladder and make you urinate more often or more urgently. If they do, limit them in your daily diet.

Train your bladder.

If you are urinating more than once every 2 hours, retraining your bladder to hold it just a little longer each time can help. For example, if you urinate every hour, try holding it for 10 to 15 minutes longer. Increase the time by 10 to 15 minutes until you are up to holding it for 2 hours.

Managing Overactive Bladder (continued)

Control your urges and leaks.

Try the following tips to help control strong urges or leaks on the way to the bathroom:

If you can, sit down. If not, bend forward slightly with your knees relaxed.

Do a few pelvic floor muscle squeezes or Kegel exercises when you feel the urge. Squeeze the muscles around your vagina as if you were holding in urine or lifting a marble in the vagina. Do 4 to 5 squeezes.

Relax. Rushing to the bathroom can make leakage and the urge worse. Calm down by using a mantra, "I will not leak; I am in control of my bladder." Using a distraction like counting backwards from 100 by 7's or saying your ABC's backwards can help you make it to the bathroom.

On the other hand, some people ignore the urge to urinate and hold it for too long. If you have not urinated for 4 or more hours and then rush to urinate or leak on the way to the bathroom, try urinating every 2 1/2 to 3 hours during the daytime. This will help you get better control over your bladder.

Manage constipation.

Hard and bulky stool in the rectum can put pressure on the bladder. Talk with your physician or healthcare professional about a diet and fiber supplements that may be right for you.

They may recommend that you:

Take an over-the-counter supplement like Metamucil®, Benefiber®, Citrucel® or Miralax®.

Drink enough fluids (water) during the day.

Eat enough fiber in your diet (25 to 30 grams of fiber every day for a healthy adult). Choose fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

Exercise.

Exercise can help your bladder and bowel health. Get enough exercise every day. Even a simple activity like walking, dancing, playing with your children/ grandchildren, gardening or housework can help.

Maintain a healthy weight.

Body mass index, or BMI, is a measure of body fat based on your height and weight. A healthy BMI under 30 can also help your bladder.

Stop smoking.

Smoking can affect the nerves to your bladder and cause you to urinate more often. It can also make you cough more, which can cause leakage in some women. Talk with your physician or healthcare professional about ways to help you stop smoking.

Manage urinating during the night.

If you urinate more than 1 or 2 times per night, try the following:

Limit fluids 2 to 3 hours before you go to sleep (unless you need to have something to drink with medications before bedtime).

If you have swelling in your legs, ask your physician or healthcare professional if wearing compression stockings during the daytime might help. Elevate your legs for 10 to 20 minutes 2 to 3 hours before bedtime. This can help reduce the fluid in your legs and help you urinate before you sleep.

Talk with your physician or healthcare professional if you have sleep apnea. This or other health problems may make you urinate more at night.

Managing Overactive Bladder (continued)

Genito-urinary syndrome of menopause

Genito-urinary syndrome of menopause (GSM) is a condition found in some women who have reached menopause.

Symptoms include:

Vaginal dryness

Pain with vaginal intercourse/sex

Frequent urinary tract infections

Feeling a strong urge or need to urinate frequently

If you are post-menopausal, your physician or healthcare professional may ask you to use an estrogen cream or tablet in the vagina to help.

More help for bladder problems

If you have tried all of these things and still have problems, your physician or healthcare professional may need to look more closely at what might be making you urinate more often and urgently. They may do more testing or recommend other treatments.

They may recommend that you see a urogynecologist, a physician who specializes in urinary problems in women. To find a urogynecologist at Northwestern Medicine, go to [urogynecology.nm.org](https://www.northwestern.edu/urogynecology) or call 312.694.7337 (TTY: 711).

You may also see a PHPT to help you further manage your overactive bladder. Many PHPTs can do a form of massage called myofascial therapy to help with bladder problems. They can help you learn exercises to help you control your symptoms. To find a PHPT at Northwestern Medicine, go to [nm.org](https://www.northwestern.edu/pelvic-health-physical-therapy) and search for "pelvic health physical therapy" or call 312.926.8810 (TTY: 711).

If you have any questions, ask your physician or healthcare professional.