Overactive bladder

Your bladder has to store enough urine (wee) (between 250 – 500 millilitres) to allow you to do daily activities and have enough sleep.

When your bladder is filling up, the bladder muscle is relaxed. When the bladder starts to become full it sends a signal to the brain. When we first feel the need to go to the toilet, we can usually hold on until it is convenient to go. When we decide to go to the toilet, the bladder muscles begin to contract. Adults usually empty their bladder every three to four hours during the day.

At night it is normal to need the toilet once. If you are over 60 years old you will probably find you get up to urinate more than once and by the age of 90 you may need to get up four times a night.

If you have an overactive bladder you may have some or all of the following symptoms:

- **Urgency**: you will suddenly need to go to the toilet immediately – and if you do not, your urine may leak
- **Frequency**: you will go to the toilet a lot, eight times or more, but only passing small amounts of urine
- **Urge incontinence**: you will have the feeling of urgency and don’t get to the toilet in time

What can I do about it?

You can try something called bladder retraining. It can help you reduce the number of times you need the toilet each day and increase the time between toilet visits to about three hours.

If you get up to go to the toilet more than once during the night:

- Try avoiding caffeine-based drinks for five hours before bedtime as they can keep you awake
- Cutting down the number of drinks you have in the evening may help
- Just take sips if you’re thirsty during the night.

Our Continence Advisory Service can help you regain control of your bladder.

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Why do frequency and urgency happen?

These symptoms happen when the bladder muscle starts to contract before we go to the toilet. This can happen if you get into the habit of going to the toilet ‘just in case’. This means that the bladder only has to hold a small amount of urine, instead of waiting until the bladder is full.

Urgency and frequency can be affected by:

- Anxiety
- Constipation
- Alcohol
- Prostate enlargement
- Infection
- Certain medicines
- Caffeine
- A disease of the nervous system in men e.g. Parkinson’s disease.

In many cases the cause is not known.

Caffeine

Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, chocolate, cola and many painkiller tablets, both prescribed and bought. You can become used to the effects of caffeine so may not notice the ones we mention in this leaflet (see below).

A maximum of six cups per day is advised. You should avoid caffeine altogether if you have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, kidney, liver or heart disease. If you choose decaffeinated drinks, make sure the caffeine has not been extracted by chemical methods.

Caffeine can affect your bladder by:

- Slightly increasing the amount of urine you produce
- Reducing the length and depth of your sleep. This can increase the number of times you need to get up to go to the toilet at night.
- Increasing urgency, frequency and the number of times you have to get up to the toilet at night if you have an overactive bladder
- Slightly reducing the muscle tone of your bladder. This may mean you leak urine more.

If you decide to try bladder retraining it might help to reduce your caffeine intake to less than 100mg per day (approximately two cups of tea or coffee).

Cutting down on caffeine

If you stop having caffeine do it gradually over two weeks to avoid the following withdrawal symptoms:

- headache
- drowsiness
- stomach upsets
- irritability
- muscle pains
- sweating
- a runny nose.

General information about fluid intake

Aim to drink about eight teacups of fluid each day (approx 1.5 litres). If you do not drink enough you will produce concentrated urine that may irritate your bladder and make the symptoms worse.

It is sensible to drink less if you are going on a long journey or outings but make sure you drink 1.5 litres in total during the day. If you have lots of problems with your bladder, then have your drinks when it is easier to get to a toilet.