



An tOspidéal Náisiúnta Máithreachais  
The National Maternity Hospital

## Physiotherapy Department

### Stress Urinary Incontinence



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Stress urinary incontinence (SUI) is the involuntary leaking of urine when pressure is put on the bladder with things like coughing, sneezing, laughing, and exercise

SUI is common. It affects 10-20% of women of all ages. It is treatable, and physiotherapy is recommended as a first-line treatment.

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Visit our website: [www.nmh.ie](http://www.nmh.ie)

# Bladder Care

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The urethra (tube that carries urine out of the body) and bladder are supported by the pelvic floor muscles, These muscles squeeze when you cough, sneeze or exercise to stop you leaking. Weakness in the muscles or damage to the bladder neck support can result in leakage.

These muscles may weaken due to:

- Pregnancy and childbirth
- Menopause
- Chronic constipation
- Chronic coughing
- Chronic heavy lifting
- High-impact exercise with poor technique
- Unhealthy weight
- Genetics



## Lifestyle and Diet Modifications



Making certain dietary and lifestyle changes can significantly improve bladder symptoms.

Adjusting your fluid intake: both excessive and insufficient fluid intake can worsen UI:

- Too much fluid causes rapid bladder filling, which may trigger spasms
- Too little fluid results in concentrated urine that can irritate the bladder wall
- Aim for your urine to be the colour of pale straw by the afternoon
- Avoid fluids which irritate the bladder such caffeine (tea and coffee), fizzy drinks, alcohol, acidic drinks (fruit juicy) and spicy foods. Reduce slowly to avoid withdrawal symptoms like headaches
- Avoid drinking large volumes all at once. Spread your fluid intake evenly throughout the day to minimize sudden bladder filling
- Stop smoking and managing a long-standing cough if you have one

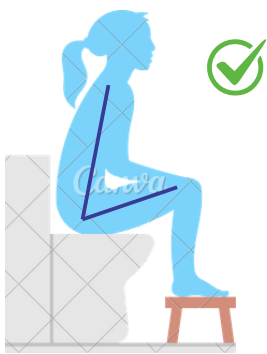


# Bowel Care

It is important to avoid constipation as it puts strain on the pelvic floor muscles. Stool should be soft, formed and easy to pass.

- Try not to miss meals. Eat breakfast to allow your digestive system time to work before you have to leave the house.
- Don't delay going to the loo once you have the urge to empty your bowels
- Ask your doctor about any medications you are prescribed. Some may be causing constipation, so you may need to make allowances for this.
- Avoid relying on laxatives; use for short term only.

**The following will help you to comfortably pass a bowel motion:**



- Use a foot stool to ensure your knees are higher than your hips
- Maintain a straight back avoid slumping
- Lean forward resting forearms on thighs
- Practice your deep breathing to help the pelvic floor relax
- Swell your tummy rather than straining - imagine you are blowing out birthday candles or saying the word "OOooo"
- **Relax and don't rush**

**The following can help soften the consistency of your stool can help with stimulating digestion:**

1



Variety of fruit and veg

2



Daily fibre in your diet  
(30g: eg nuts, veg, chia seeds, flax seeds)

3



Regular fluids (~2L water)

4



Movement & exercise

**Next we will discuss pelvic floor exercises which can help to prevent these issues.**

# Pelvic Floor Exercises

## Before You Start: Finding the Muscle

Your pelvic floor muscles are internal and do not include:

- Tummy, thighs, calves, buttocks, or eyebrows!

You should feel a lift inward and upward

Do not:

- Clench buttocks
- Hold your breath
- Squeeze legs

Different cues work for different people, experiment with what works best for you



## Technique

### Step 1: Contracting Your Pelvic Floor

Gently squeeze shut your back passage (as if holding back wind), your vagina (as if gripping a tampon) and your urethra (as if stopping your flow of urine). ⬆️

The muscle contracts from the tailbone all the way forward to the pubic bone

Draw your pelvic floor **inwards and upwards**

Release - let the muscle fully relax releasing all tension ⬇️

First, practice tightening and releasing these muscles without holding or counting



# Pelvic Floor Exercises

## Step 2 : Relaxing your Pelvic Floor

The pelvic floor must relax fully so that we can empty our bladder, empty our bowel and have intercourse pain free

It is important to practice release as much as contraction. Allow this to happen gently - do not force or bear down

Relaxation exercise:

- Lie on your back/side and breathe deeply
- Relaxation is felt on the out breath
- It may help to imagine your pelvic floor muscles releasing like a drop of water hitting a still pond and rippling outwards, or flower petals gently opening



## Step 3 : Strengthening your Pelvic Floor

Your aim is to be able to do the following three times a day:

- 10 holds of 10 seconds each
- 10 fast contractions

Start lying down and progress to sitting or standing when able. Begin by holding for a couple of seconds and gradually each week build-up to the 'magnificent 10'

It is important that you keep breathing naturally whilst doing the exercises

Give yourself time between squeezes to let go of the pelvic floor muscles completely

Squeezy is a useful app by the NHS to help with your exercises. **Click the squeezy icon to download!**



# Pelvic Floor Exercises

## Step 4 : Improving function

Use 'The Knack': tighten your pelvic floor before coughing, sneezing, or lifting to reduce leaks.

Once you can do a pelvic floor contraction confidently in standing, you can try work the contraction into functional exercises, such as sit to stand, or your gym routine (squats and lunges, jumping)

## How to Check Your Technique

- Mirror test: Area between vagina and anus should move up and in – never bulge
- Partner feedback: Ask if they feel the squeeze during sex
- Stop test: Try stopping urine mid-flow – only do this occasionally as a test



## How Often to Exercise?

- 3 times a day is ideal
- Avoid overdoing it — more is not necessarily better
- Improvements may take 12–16 weeks (around 3–4 months)

## Exercise Diary

### Slow pull-ups

Hold your pelvic floor maximal squeeze for as long as possible (up to 10 seconds) and then let go. Then see how many times you can do that in a row with a 3-4 second rest between each squeeze

I managed a hold of \_\_\_\_\_ seconds, repeated \_\_\_\_\_ times

My goal is to hold for \_\_\_\_\_ seconds, repeated \_\_\_\_\_ times

### Fast pull-ups

Maximally squeeze tightly and then relax your pelvic floor, count how many times you can do this in a row until the muscles fatigue

I managed \_\_\_\_\_ fast contractions in a row

My goal is to do \_\_\_\_\_ fast contractions



# Treatment Options

Your options for treatment will depend on the severity of your leaking and your individual circumstances, like your age, general health, and lifestyle. Your choice of treatment will depend on how much your leaking affects your quality of life.

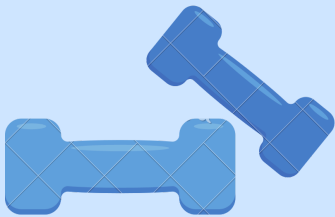
The first line of treatment for SUI is good bladder and bowel health and pelvic floor strengthening, guided by a physiotherapist as previously discussed.

If you have done your exercises and your leaking is not improving, you have the following treatment options:

## Exercise

Exercise has many positive effects on both your physical and emotional wellbeing.

**Do not be afraid of exercise and activity because of your leaking. Think of all the movements you do on a daily basis. Normal movement is important for function.**



- Strengthening is important for your pelvic floor, mental health and often your sense of personal identity.
- Consider wearing a pair of supportive leggings or shorts (SRC leggings, my pelvic bra)
- Begin or return to general exercise by gradually increasing intensity.
- Initially work on low impact exercise such as modified aerobics, cycling, cross trainer, faster walking, Pilates or swimming.
- Try to be in tune with your body, if any exercise feels uncomfortable or you are experiencing leaking, don't continue and seek advice from a healthcare professional.
- Recommend working under the guidance of a pelvic health physiotherapist and/or a qualified personal trainer, especially for women who want to return to high impact/intensity exercise or weight lifting.
- If you require any guidance on returning to exercise, you can request a physiotherapy referral from your doctor and we would be happy to help.

## Continence Pessaries

- A pessary is a PVC or silicone device that fits into your vagina to help support the neck of your bladder.
- There are various types and sizes of pessary; your physiotherapist or doctor will advise which one is best for your situation. Fitting the correct size of pessary is important and may take more than one attempt.
- Pessaries should be changed or removed, cleaned and reinserted regularly.
- Pessaries do not usually cause any problems but may on occasion cause inflammation.



# Treatment Options cont.

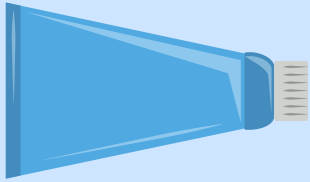
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## Medication

There are some medications which can help with SUI, though options are limited.

You can speak with your medical team should you feel this is an option for you



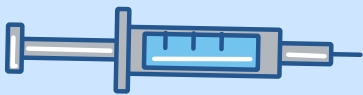
## Vaginal Oestrogen

A course of vaginal oestrogen medication may help with SUI

It works locally to improve the quality of vaginal tissue making it thicker and better lubricated and as a result, improving the strength.

The medication can be in the form of tablets, cream or a ring that is inserted into your vagina.

Please note vaginal oestrogen needs to be prescribed by your GP/doctor



## Bulking Agents

Bulking agents are materials that are injected into the wall of the urethra (the tube that carries urine out of the body).

The injection adds bulk around the urethra which helps it to close more effectively.

The procedure is usually done in hospital as a day case, usually under local anaesthetic.

The aim is to improve bladder control without major surgery. You can speak with your doctor for more information



## Surgery

An operation may be appropriate for some women with bladder problems.

Whether you choose to have surgery will depend on how severe your symptoms are and how your leaking affects your daily life. You may want to consider surgery if other options have not adequately helped.

If you plan to have children, you may choose to delay surgery until your family is complete.

# Postnatal SUI

If you feel like you are experiencing incontinence after having a baby, we first recommend you attend the online physiotherapy class Healthy Bodies After Birth.

The class takes place online every Friday morning from 11am  
You can email our secretary for the link to the class and attend any Friday that suits you  
[njordan@nmh.ie](mailto:njordan@nmh.ie)

You can also self-refer to the NMH Physiotherapy Service for the first six months following your delivery by contacting [physio@nmh.ie](mailto:physio@nmh.ie)

More information on bladder health can be found by clicking on or scanning this QR code to watch a short video from The Pelvic Floor Centre



## HEALTHY BODIES AFTER BIRTH

An information session on caring and reconnecting with your body as it recovers after birth

**Topics include:**

- Bladder & Bowel Care
- Abdominal Care
- Pelvic Floor Advice
- Returning to Movement
- and more!

Every Friday at 11am

Online



Physiotherapist led information session  
Email [njordan@nmh.ie](mailto:njordan@nmh.ie) to book your place

[www.nmh.ie](http://www.nmh.ie)



# Physiotherapy Class

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If you have been referred by your GP and are waiting to see your gynaecologist in The National Maternity Hospital you may attend an online physiotherapy session

Who Should Attend:

This session is for women experiencing:

- Bladder or bowel leakage
- Pelvic organ prolapse (e.g., bladder, uterus, rectum)
- Menopausal pelvic floor concerns

The session aims to provide you with practical advice to improve your bladder, bowel or prolapse symptoms

What to Expect:

- Lifestyle and behavioural strategies
- A better understanding of pelvic floor anatomy and function
- Common causes incontinence and prolapse
- Guided pelvic floor muscle exercises
- Advice on safe exercise
- Opportunity to ask questions and share experiences in a safe environment

The class runs monthly online, Email [physio@nmh.ie](mailto:physio@nmh.ie) to book your place.