



An tOspidéal Náisiúnta Máithreachais
The National Maternity Hospital

Physiotherapy Department

Understanding and Managing Urgency Urinary Incontinence

Normal Bladder Sensation

As urine enters the bladder, the bladder wall (detrusor muscle) expands. At around 150–200 ml, the bladder begins to stretch enough to signal a sensation of fullness. As filling continues, the urge to pass urine intensifies. Most people will feel a strong urge to urinate at approximately 400–500 ml

What Is Urgency Urinary Incontinence?

Urgency Urinary Incontinence (UUI) is the involuntary leakage of urine that occurs when a sudden, intense urge to urinate can't be controlled long enough to reach the toilet. This differs from Stress Urinary Incontinence, which occurs during activities like coughing, sneezing, or laughing, due to different underlying anatomical causes



Regaining Control

Understanding Normal Bladder Function

When you consume fluids, they enter your bloodstream, are filtered by the kidneys into urine, and then stored in the bladder. As the bladder fills, it should expand like a balloon and send signals that gradually increase your awareness of the need to urinate. This urge should remain under your voluntary control until you choose to release it by sitting on the toilet

Lifestyle and Diet Modifications

Making certain dietary and lifestyle changes can significantly reduce detrusor overactivity and improve UUI symptoms. Your physiotherapist will guide you through the most relevant changes for your needs

Adjusting Your Fluid Intake: both excessive and insufficient fluid intake can worsen UUI:

- Too much fluid causes rapid bladder filling, which may trigger spasms
- Too little fluid results in concentrated urine that can irritate the bladder wall

Fluid Intake Goals:

- Week 1: Aim to drink _____ per day
- Week 2: Aim to drink _____ per day
- Week 3: Aim to drink _____ per day

Reducing Caffeine

Caffeine (found in coffee, tea, chocolate, soft drinks, and sports drinks) may increase bladder spasms and urgency. Gradual reduction is advised to avoid withdrawal symptoms like headaches

Limiting Artificial Sweeteners

Artificial sweeteners (common in diet products) may irritate the bladder. Try reducing or avoiding these, especially in diet soft drinks

Spacing Your Fluids

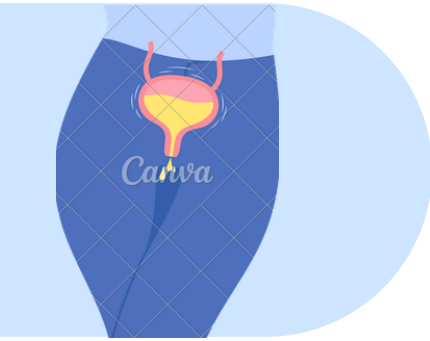
Avoid drinking large volumes all at once. Spread your fluid intake evenly throughout the day to minimize sudden bladder filling



Behaviour Retraining

What Is Behaviour Retraining?

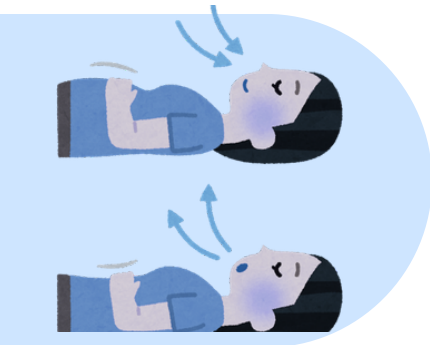
During a bladder spasm, the natural instinct is to rush to the toilet. However, sudden movement increases bladder pressure and the risk of leakage. Instead, use techniques to calm the bladder, delay urination, and reduce urgency. The key is to wait until the spasm subsides before walking calmly to the toilet



How to manage a bladder spasm: Relaxation and reflex techniques

Try these techniques to help reduce the intensity and duration of bladder spasms:

- Relaxed, deep breathing
- Applying gentle pressure to the genital area
- Curling your toes inside your shoes or against the floor
- Rising onto the balls of your feet, tightening your calf muscles
- Sitting on your heel (providing pressure near the front of the vagina)
- Counting backwards by 7s (e.g. 103, 96, 89...)
- Distracting tasks such as creating a shopping list



Important: Some people have urgency caused by pelvic floor overactivity, not bladder overactivity. In these cases, pelvic floor contractions may worsen symptoms

Tell your physiotherapist if contractions increase your urgency

Regaining Control

Understanding Normal Bladder Function

Why These Techniques Work

1. Genital Region Pressure

The pudendal nerve carries signals from the genital area to the spinal cord—the same area where bladder signals are processed. Applying pressure here distracts the spinal cord from bladder signals and reduces urgency. Try:

- Pressing your hand gently upward on the genital region (only when in private)
- Sitting on your heel or arm of a chair to apply pressure
- If none of these are possible, simply sit down to help reduce pressure



2. Toe Curling / Standing on Toes

The posterior tibial nerve, connected to your bladder's control centre in the spine (S2–S3), can be stimulated by:

- Curling your toes
- Tensing calf muscles
- Rising on the balls of your feet

These actions can help relax the bladder and reduce urgency



3. Cognitive Distraction

The prefrontal cortex (responsible for concentration and problem-solving) also plays a role in bladder control. During urgency episodes, focusing on cognitive tasks can reduce emotional panic and help relax the bladder

Try:

- Counting backwards by 7s
- Reciting a shopping list or planning your day



Regaining Control

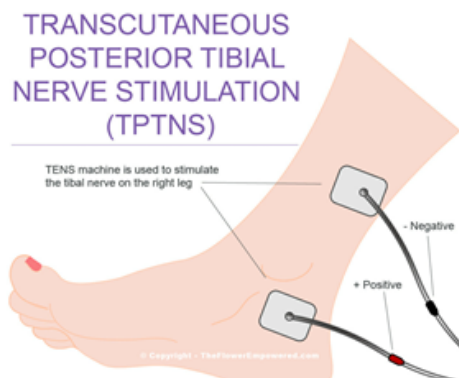
Understanding Normal Bladder Function

TENS for treating Urgency Urinary Incontinence

TENS (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation) helps manage UUI by sending gentle electrical impulses to the nerves connected to the bladder

These impulses:

- Calm down the overactive bladder muscles
- Reduce the frequent urge to urinate



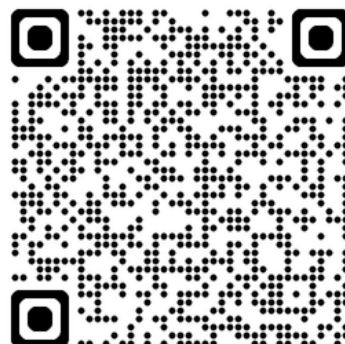
Recommended Usage Guidelines

To use TENS effectively:

- Frequency: 2 to 3 times per week
- Duration: At least 30 minutes per session
- Total period: Use consistently for at least 6 weeks
- Combine with pelvic floor exercises and bladder training for better results

Summary: Urgency urinary incontinence can be improved with education, diet, fluid control, and behavioural strategies. Through understanding your body's signals and using simple techniques, you can reduce the frequency and intensity of urgency episodes. For personalised advice and to monitor your progress, work closely with your physiotherapist

Link to Bladder Diary



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

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



Physiotherapy Class

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 to book your place.