



THE SIMON FOUNDATION
FOR CONTINENCE

fact sheet

PROMOTING CONTINENCE – CHANGING LIVES

BLADDER HEALTH IN AGING

Physical changes that accompany aging usually occur slowly, enabling older adults to compensate for and adapt to their changing bodies. Like gray hair and skin wrinkles, the changes to our bladder and kidneys do not occur overnight, but over time these changes can become significant.

The ability to be continent is an amazingly intricate and complicated function. Urine, produced by the kidneys, drains into the bladder muscle by way of the ureters. As the bladder muscle expands, signals are sent from receptors in the bladder muscle wall to the brain. At the appropriate time, a return message from the brain instructs the bladder muscle to contract and the sphincter muscle at the base of the bladder to relax, allowing urine to flow to the outside of the body. As we age, changes occur that make bladder control more challenging.

Ageing affects the kidneys and they no longer concentrate urine as effectively as they once could. Thus more water is lost through voiding than when we were young. At the same time, the bladder's capacity can be declining along with the bladder's ability to contract, which often leads to residual urine in the bladder after voiding. Due to incomplete emptying, it doesn't take as long for your bladder to refill after you've been to the toilet. This change may explain why many older individuals need to urinate frequently.

All of these age related changes—kidneys that do not concentrate urine as well, a lessened capacity of the bladder to hold the increased amount of urine produced by the kidneys, and the possibility of

decreased contractility leading to residual urine— all put the older person at an increased risk of losing bladder control. Age does not cause urinary incontinence, but age-related changes may predispose individuals to incontinence.

The Central Nervous System and the Bladder

Bladder control can be affected by changes that occur in the central nervous system (CNS) resulting in a slower response time for messages to travel to and from the brain; thus there is less warning time to realize that your bladder is full. For many people, changes in their central nervous system result in increased urgency and/or an overactive bladder with more uninhibited bladder contractions.

The Sex Factor

The female urinary system: Changes in a woman's urinary system due to aging include: (1) a change in the length and elasticity of the urethra (the passage from the bladder to the outside of the body), and (2) lessening of the strength of the sphincter muscle. This decline is impacted by the loss of estrogen after menopause. Additionally, the urethra, which is much shorter in women, often becomes colonized with bacteria.

The combined effect of these changes is that increased uninhibited bladder contractions force urine into a weakened, less resistant urethra. When the contraction subsides and the bladder relaxes, bacteria are carried back into the bladder from the urethra with the flow of urine, causing an increased risk of recurrent urinary tract

infections (UTI). For some women, successfully treating an overactive bladder can reduce the incidence of recurring UTIs.

The male urinary system: It is usually changes in the prostate gland which most affects continence in men. The prostate is a doughnut shaped gland (about the size of a walnut) located just below the bladder neck. It is normal for the prostate to enlarge as a part of the aging process, called benign prostatic hyperplasia or BPH. An enlarged prostate can press on the urethra and interfere with urine flow causing symptoms such as: difficulty urinating or starting to urinate; a weak urine stream; dribbling at the end of urination; frequent urination; sudden, strong urges to urinate; and urinating several times at night (nocturia).

Although there are sex related differences, many aging changes affect both sexes, such as nocturia. When young, the majority of urine production occurs during the day, but this reverses with age. Swelling in the lower extremities and cardiac failure may add to the causes of frequent trips to the bathroom during the night.

Lastly, older adults are more vulnerable to disease related and pharmaceutical induced stressors. For instance diabetes can decrease sensation, leading to impaired contractility of the bladder muscle. Parkinson's and Alzheimer's are also among the impactful diseases of older people which may lead to bladder problems.

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BLADDER HEALTH IN AGING

It is Never Too Late to Fight Back

For vanity's sake many of us color our hair and cream the wrinkles from our face, but most of us give little thought to preserving our bladder's function. Changes that happen with aging can be minimized. It involves thought and effort to begin healthy bladder practices to maintain as much function as possible for as many years as possible into old age. Becoming knowledgeable about the aging bladder can help us do just that.

Practice Good Toileting Habits

It is never too late to practice good toileting habits in order to prevent problems at a later stage in life. Avoid denying the urge to urinate; this can overstretch the bladder muscle and cause your bladder to lose elasticity and tone. Another habit to break is emptying frequently "just in case," which is detrimental to good bladder tone as it doesn't allow the bladder to stretch when filling. Voiding regularly every three to six hours will help to keep your bladder muscle healthy.

Good habits also include proper positioning when using the toilet. Toilet height is important so that the feet are resting firmly on the floor (or on a small stool), which enables proper bowel emptying. Whether emptying your bladder or your bowels, it is important to take time to relax and allow the muscles to work.

Do Not Smoke

The chronic cough that many long-term smokers live with can

contribute to stress urinary incontinence (SUI). SUI is the loss of urine when you cough, sneeze, laugh or lift due to the pressure on the bladder overriding the ability of the closure mechanism to hold in urine.

Maintain an Appropriate Weight for Your Height

Obesity puts a strain on your entire pelvic floor area and muscles. These are the very muscles you need to remain strong in order to support your bladder and the bladder neck.

Enhance Your Mobility

Maintaining mobility is good for your aging bladder because mobility will allow you to reach a bathroom quickly when necessary. Exercising for increased strength and balance is important. Knowing that you can depend upon good balance will allow you to feel confident if you need to use the bathroom in the middle of the night.

Eliminate Bladder Irritants

Many people report that certain foods irritate their bladder. Consider eliminating carbonated beverages, spicy and acidic foods, caffeine, chocolate, and alcohol from your diet. Slowly add your favorites back to your diet to see if they affect your bladder control. In this manner you can tell which foods irritate your bladder.

Avoid Dehydration

Lack of fluid results in concentrated urine that can irritate the bladder wall. In addition, dehydration can lead to changes in bowel habits and constipation. It is important to drink before you become thirsty, because increasing

age is one of the major risk factors for dehydration. You may be dehydrated if you have: headaches; kidney stones; low energy and fatigue; dark urine; constipation; or muscle and joint soreness.

One way to determine if you are drinking enough is by the color of your urine. Urine the color of water is good and the color of lemonade is OK; however, if your urine is the shade of apple juice you need to drink more fluid and if it is dark like Coca Cola you may need to seek medical attention for dehydration.

Have an Accessible Bathroom

Be sure the bathroom you use has adequate lighting, both within the room and in the hallways, remove dangerous throw rugs; and make sure the path is clear (however, you might wish to position furniture where it is easy to hang onto).

Manage Your Bladder

If you take diuretic medications, your doctor may shift the time that you take this medication so that you do not overload your bladder with fluids at night. Also, you might elevate your legs a couple of hours each day - helping to eliminate fluids during the daytime. And once you learn how to avoid dehydration, avoiding fluids a few hours before bedtime will help you get a good night's rest.

It is Never Too Late to Improve Your Bladder Health

Begin right now to make bladder health a top priority, whether you are 45, 60, or in your 90s - focusing time and attention on this little muscle can only lead to a better behaving bladder long into old age.

The Simon Foundation is a not-for-profit educational organization dedicated to helping people with incontinence.

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