NOTES

Your doctor or therapist has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about an issue related to your health. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, discuss them with your doctor or therapist.

Managing Urinary Incontinence

POOR BLADDER CONTROL IS A TOPIC YOU shouldn't be afraid to discuss with your health professional. Although you may feel embarrassed by it, urinary incontinence (UI) is common and shouldn't be ignored. The condition affects men and women of all ages. In fact, 13 million Americans live with it every day.

Contrary to popular belief, UI isn't a normal consequence of aging. And it definitely isn't something you just need to bear. Eighty percent of UI cases can be cured, or at the very least improved, according to the National Association for Continence. The two most common types include:

• *Stress incontinence*. An activity-related condition, stress incontinence affects one out of every 10 women of all ages, and one in five women older than 40. Jumping, lifting heavy objects, sneezing and laughing can put pressure on the bladder, causing leakage.

• *Urge incontinence*. More common in older adults, urge incontinence is the urgent need to urinate and an inability to get to the bathroom in time. Poor toilet habits, nerve damage and dietary irritants—caffeine, citrus-based products, artificial sweeteners and lactose products—can cause the condition.

Treatment

Whether you experience urge or stress incontinence, Kegel exercises – performed correctly – can offer great relief. How? They strengthen the periurethral (in men and women) and perivaginal (in women) muscles, which hold urine in your bladder so you can get to the bathroom before urinating. Doing Kegels regularly, therefore, can decrease the incidences of urinary incontinence you experience.

For a smaller percentage of people (10 percent to 15 percent), Kegel exercises totally resolve the problem. But to benefit from the exercises, you need to persist with them. In fact, it will take at least four to six weeks for your muscles to get stronger. For people who are 65 and older, it may take to eight weeks to see any benefits.

How Kegel Exercises Work

Step I: Get to know where your pelvic floor muscles are located by trying to stop your urine stream while paying attention to the muscles you use to do this. You should feel a sensation of closing and lifting in as you squeeze. Be sure to do the exercises correctly; improper or poor form may make the condition worse. Common mistakes include holding your breath and contracting your stomach, thigh and buttocks muscles. Focus on keeping these muscles relaxed and remember the muscle you want to concentrate on is your pelvic floor.

Step II: Perform muscle-training exercises. Although they can be done in any position, it may be easiest to lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat. Squeeze or tighten your pelvic muscles (as if you were stopping the flow of urine or the passage of gas) for 10 seconds. Then relax for 10 seconds. Repeat this process 25 times, and do a set of 25 contractions twice a day.

Other Avenues

Beside Kegels, your therapist may prescribe other treatment options as well. They include:

• biofeedback or electrical stimulation,

• progressive resistance exercises with vaginal cones or weights,

• pessaries or urethral inserts to prevent leakage or control urine flow, and

• surgery. In specific (and usually rare) instances, surgery may be required. Surgery can relieve an obstruction or correct a bladder neck and urethra deformity. Some women may also need a uterine or pelvic suspension operation.

Medications to calm overactive bladder muscles, dietary changes to exclude foods and drinks that irritate your bladder, and incontinence products, such as absorbent pads, also can be used to manage your condition.

No matter what treatment you receive, however, one thing is certain. Without attention, incontinence can cause unnecessary social isolation, anxiety and other medical conditions. If you experience any symptoms of incontinence, talk to your health professional. Don't let the initial embarrassment keep you from living your life fully.

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