Urge incontinence: A guide for women

World Continence Week Special Edition

THE UROLOGY FOUNDATION

You're not alone

Urge incontinence - the sudden, strong need to wee - affects millions of women. Sometimes it's hard to get to the toilet in time. But there are ways to take back control, even while waiting for a professional assessment.

This guide offers practical, reassuring tips to help you manage symptoms and feel more confident.

What is Urge Incontinence?

Urge incontinence is often linked to an overactive bladder (OAB). You feel a strong urge to pee - sometimes out of the blue - and leaks can happen if you don't make it to the toilet in time.

You might also:

- **Feel like you need to wee very often (more than eight times in 24hrs)**
- **Wake up several times in the night to go**
- **Struggle to "hold on" once the urge starts**

What causes Urge Incontinence or an Overactive Bladder?

Overactive bladder muscles

The bladder muscle (called the detrusor) contracts too early or too often, squeezing before it's actually full.

Overactive bladder nerves

Sometimes the nerves that signal your bladder to empty become too sensitive or misfire. This can make you feel like you urgently need to go, even when your bladder isn't ready.

Menopause and hormone changes

Falling oestrogen levels during and after menopause can affect the bladder and nearby tissues, making the bladder more sensitive and less stretchy.

Bladder irritation

Certain drinks (like tea, coffee, fizzy or alcoholic drinks) or a bladder infection (like a urinary tract infection – also known as a UTI) can make the bladder lining irritated and trigger urgency.

Neurological conditions (less common)

Conditions like multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, or stroke can affect the nerve signals between your bladder and brain, causing bladder control issues.

Could it be a UTI?

Urge symptoms can sometimes be caused by a bladder infection (UTI).

UTIs typically cause:

- Burning or stinging when you wee
- Cloudy or smelly urine
- Feeling unwell or having a fever

If your symptoms are new, severe or come with pain, speak to your GP or call NHS 111.

UTI INFORMATION SERVICE

Refer to The Urology Foundation's UTI Information Service and Helpline **www.theurologyfoundation.org/urology-health/uti-information-service-and-helpline/**

What you can do while you wait for your appointment

Self-help strategies

Do make an appointment with your GP. There will be treatments available ranging from physiotherapy, medications, procedures and surgery.

While you're waiting for your appointment, the following tips can help to reduce symptoms and improve your confidence.

Smart fluid intake

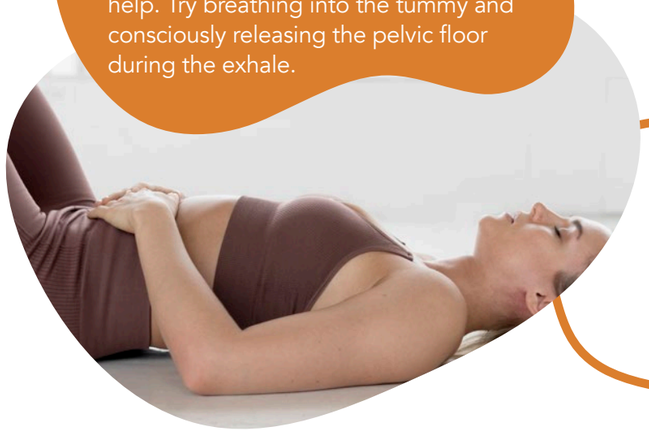
- Don't cut back on your fluids, even though it may seem like the right thing to do. Concentrated urine and dehydration can irritate the bladder.
- Aim for 6–8 drinks a day, spaced evenly (approx.2 litres of clear fluids, water, diluted juice).
- Reduce intake of caffeine and alcohol, these produce more urine (diuretic effect) and can irritate the bladder.
- Reduce drinks in the evening if you're up at night.

Bladder training

- Start going to the toilet on a schedule (e.g. every 2 hours).
- Try to delay the urge slightly each time - even by a few minutes.

Pelvic floor awareness

Some women carry tension in their pelvic floor. Learning to relax - as well as strengthen - these muscles can help. Try breathing into the tummy and consciously releasing the pelvic floor during the exhale.



Stress management

- Anxiety can make symptoms worse.
- Gentle exercise, relaxation breathing and mindfulness can help reduce urgency.

Exercises such as yoga can be beneficial.

Cut down on triggers

- Common irritants include caffeine, alcohol, fizzy drinks, spicy foods, sweeteners.
- Try reducing one at a time to see if it makes a difference.

Bladder-friendly supplements (optional)

Some women ask about bladder supplements that are on the market. These supplements are thought to support bladder tone, reduce urgency, or help prevent UTIs. It is best to look at the evidence, which can often be contradictory. Always check with a GP or Pharmacist before taking, especially if you are taking any other medication.

- Pumpkin seed extract – may help strengthen bladder muscles
- Soy germ isoflavones – often used by post-menopausal women
- D Mannose – action to combine with e coli on the bladder wall and then is removed when you empty your bladder
- Cranberry – action to prevent e coli sticking to the wall of the bladder
- Vitamin C helps acidify the urine and is hostile to some bacteria – e coli

Pads and absorbent pants: practical support for leaks

Pads and absorbent pants can help you feel more secure while you work on improving bladder control.

Pelvic floor exercises

- These strengthen the muscles that support your bladder.
- Try the NHS "Squeezy" app or learn the "squeeze, lift and hold" technique.
- Practice 3x a day. Aim for 10 squeezes each time. Alternate slow, then fast squeezes.

Key Points

- Choose products made for **bladder leaks**, not periods. They absorb urine better and protect your skin.
- Pads are slim and easy to change - ideal for light to moderate leaks.
- Absorbent pants feel like normal underwear - great for heavier leaks, overnight use, or staying active.
- Change regularly and keep the area clean to avoid irritation.
- If you're using **more than 2–3 pads or pants a day**, it's worth asking for a continence review at your surgery.

These products offer peace of mind but with the right care and support, many women find they need them less over time.

Look after your skin

If you experience leaks, use unscented, PH neutral soaps or cleansers. Avoid wipes that are perfumed as these may cause irritation and could trigger UTIs.

Build a support network

Talk to other women. You're not alone.

Consider joining a local or online continence support group.

Explore trustworthy resources like:

https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/urinary-incontinence/

The Urology Foundation

Bladder & Bowel UK

Bladder Health UK

When to seek help

Don't struggle in silence. See your GP or a continence nurse if:

- Symptoms affect your daily life
- You need to rush to the loo frequently
- You've had UTIs or bladder pain
- You are struggling to empty your bladder.

Ask about pelvic floor physiotherapy, bladder retraining support, medications, or referral to a urology specialist if needed.

Prepare for your appointment

Make the most of your future consultation:

- Keep a bladder diary for a few days . Record how wet any pads are (damp / soaking)
- Note down symptoms, what you've tried and what's helped
- Write down questions in advance so you don't forget to ask

Feeling informed puts you in a stronger position to work with your GP or specialist and make shared decisions about your care.

UTI INFORMATION SERVICE

Our confidential UTI Information Service is here to help you:

0808 801 1108

Helpline open Tuesdays and Thursdays 10am - 12 noon

nurse@theurologyfoundation.org

theurologyfoundation.org

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