

How drinks affect your bladder and bowel

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How your bladder works

Your bladder is found in the lower part of your abdomen (belly) and acts as a temporary store for your urine. Urine is the waste fluid produced by your kidneys when they clean your blood. It travels from your kidneys to your bladder, which then fills with urine. The muscles of the bladder allow it to expand, rather like a balloon. When it becomes full, you get the urge to pass urine (urinate). When you pass urine, it leaves the bladder and travels through your urethra – the tube that carries urine outside of your body.

How much should I drink every day?

Ideally, you should empty your bladder four to six times in a 24-hour period. Emptying your bladder fully is very important to help prevent infections and keep your kidneys working properly. We recommend that you drink about one-and-a-half to two litres (three to four pints or about eight cups) of fluid a day. However, you need to drink more in hot weather or if you are very active.

If you do not drink enough fluid, your urine will be very concentrated (it will appear darker in colour). This can irritate your bladder and make you more likely to develop a urinary tract infection (UTI) and need to pass urine more frequently. You are also less likely to become constipated if you drink the recommended amount of fluid. This is because water increases the bulk of your stool (poo), making it easier to move through your bowel and pass out of your body.

Bladder problems

Cystitis

Cystitis is an inflammation (swelling) of your bladder lining. It can be caused by irritation, damage or an infection. Symptoms include a sharp pain when passing urine; blood in your urine; back and stomach aches; and the need to pass urine suddenly (called urgency) or more often than usual (referred to as frequency).

Bladder infections

A bladder infection is a type of urinary tract infection (UTI) and is most commonly caused by bacteria from outside of the body travelling up the urethra and into your bladder. One of the main symptoms of a bladder infection is cystitis (see above). Other symptoms include dark, cloudy and smelly urine; a burning feeling or pain when passing urine; and not being able to empty your bladder completely.

Drinking the recommended daily amount of fluid will help prevent bladder irritation and ease the symptoms of cystitis or bladder infections.

Incontinence

Some people experience urinary incontinence (the inability to control when they urinate). There are a number of different types. Two of the most common are:

- **Urge incontinence.** This is where you have a sudden need to pass urine and leak before you are able to reach a toilet. This is often referred to as an overactive bladder.

- **Stress incontinence.** This is where you leak small amounts of urine when you cough, laugh or exercise.

If you experience incontinence, you may not feel comfortable increasing the amount you drink, in case it makes your symptoms worse and you leak more. However, some people find that if they avoid certain types of fluids (see below) their symptoms improve and they suffer less with frequency, urgency and stress incontinence. Bladder training or pelvic floor exercises can also help with incontinence – please ask a member of staff for more information on these self-help methods.

Nocturia

Nocturia is where you wake up in the night and need to pass urine. Getting up to go to the toilet once a night is considered normal. However, this generally increases with age. It is normal to get up twice a night in your seventies and up to four times a night in your nineties.

If you have a lot of trouble with nocturia, reduce the amount you drink before you go to bed. For example, have your last drink at 8pm instead of 10pm. However, you should make sure that you are still drinking the recommended daily amount of fluid.

Drinks that can affect your bladder

Caffeine

Caffeine is found in tea, coffee, hot chocolate, cola and other fizzy drinks. It can make any symptoms of urgency or frequency worse because it relaxes the muscles in your pelvis and urethra. It can also reduce how long and how deeply you sleep, so you are more likely to wake up and need to go to the toilet at night.

Cutting down on the amount of caffeine you drink could improve your symptoms. You should have a maximum of two cups (250ml each) a day. However, if you decide to cut down, reduce the amount you drink gradually, to avoid withdrawal symptoms such as headaches, drowsiness and irritability. Alternatively, you could have decaffeinated versions of these drinks.

Fruit juices

Fruit juices such as grapefruit and orange are acidic, so can irritate your bladder. They are best avoided if you have regular UTIs or an overactive bladder.

Grapefruit juice can interfere with the way your body responds to some medicines. If you drink grapefruit juice regularly and take medicines, check with your doctor or pharmacist that this is OK.

It is thought that cranberry juice can help to prevent cystitis by stopping certain bacteria (such as E coli) from growing and multiplying in your bladder. This is because of a substance in the berries called 'tannins'. Some people also think that it may help if you have developed a UTI, although there is no firm evidence to support this. If you have a catheter or regularly experience UTIs, drinking cranberry juice may help to prevent further infections. Try drinking one glass (about 200ml) of cranberry juice twice a day. It may take up to five weeks for you to feel a difference.

Do not drink cranberry juice if you have arthritis, heartburn, irritable bowel syndrome or hiatus hernia, as this could make your symptoms worse.

Cranberry juice can also interfere with the way warfarin works and make your blood thinner than it should be, so please do not drink it if you take warfarin tablets. If you have diabetes, discuss this with your doctor or dietitian before drinking, as it is high in sugar.

Herbal teas

Different herbal teas have different properties. Some (such as elderflower, rose, wild blackberry and nettle) have a diuretic effect. This means they increase your urge to go to the toilet, so you feel the need to go more often. If you have frequency or urgency, these herbal teas may make your symptoms worse.

However, chamomile tea is thought to have antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties, so it may help you if you have cystitis. It can also help to prevent and relieve flatulence (wind). If you have indigestion, lemon and ginger tea might help you.

Alcohol

Alcohol can increase the acidity of your urine and irritate the lining of your bladder. You may find it helpful to reduce the amount of alcohol you drink if you have regular UTIs or experience urge incontinence.

Fizzy drinks

Many fizzy drinks are high in sugar, which can encourage bacteria to grow. Therefore, if you have regular UTIs, try to reduce the volume of fizzy drinks you drink. You may also find it helps to reduce the amount of overall sugar in your diet. Look on the labels of food you eat, as many products contain added sugar.

Fluids and your bowel

The type of fluids that you drink can also affect your bowel movements:

- Acid-based drinks, such as orange, pineapple, cranberry and lemon juice are best avoided if you have gut problems, such as irritable bowel syndrome.
- Coffee has a laxative effect, so if you have loose stool or diarrhoea, you may want to reduce or stop drinking coffee. However, if you are constipated, it may help to restore regular bowel movements.
- Herbal teas can help with different bowel problems: ginger and peppermint teas may relieve wind and liquorice may relieve constipation. However, fruit teas such as rosehip, orange and rhubarb teas may cause diarrhoea.

Useful sources of information

The Bladder and Bowel Foundation

Offers advice and assistance over the phone from specially trained nurses.

t: 0845 345 0165 (helpline – answerphone / callback service: calls returned Mon–Fri 9am–5pm and Sat mornings)

e: info@bladderandbowelfoundation.org

w: www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org

Contact details

For more information, please contact:

- **Florence Ilegbusi**, Continence Nurse Specialist for Elderly Care, on **020 7188 2083** Monday to Wednesday and Friday, or **020 7188 2093** on Tuesdays
- **Elaine Hazell**, Continence Nurse Specialist for Urology, on **020 7188 6783** Monday to Friday
- **Ellie Stewart**, Urogynaecology Nurse Specialist for Women's Services, on **020 7188 3671** Mondays and Tuesdays only. If you leave a message on her answer machine, she will contact you on her return.

Notes

Notes

Contact us

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints)

e: complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

t: 020 7188 8815 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk

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