

## Physiotherapy department

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# Chronic cough and urinary incontinence

Urinary incontinence (UI) is a common condition that can affect women and men of all ages with a wide variety of severity and nature. UI is most common in patients with chronic chest conditions such as bronchiectasis, asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), due to the constant coughing.

If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to the physiotherapist caring for you.

### What is UI?

UI is the involuntary leakage of urine, and usually fits into one of three groups of symptoms:

- **Stress urinary incontinence** is involuntary leakage of urine on effort or exertion, or on coughing and sneezing. This is the type of incontinence most commonly reported by patients with chronic chest conditions.
- **Urge urinary incontinence** is the involuntary leakage of urine accompanied by or immediately after experiencing a sensation of urgency (a sudden desire to urinate that is difficult to delay).
- **Mixed urinary incontinence** is the involuntary leakage of urine associated with urgency incontinence, as well as the stress incontinence experienced with exertion, effort, sneezing and coughing.

### What is the pelvic floor?

The pelvic floor is made of ligaments and muscles that form a sling which supports the floor of the pelvis. The opening to the bladder (urethra) passes through this sling. The muscles of the pelvic floor must work to keep the urethra closed when you don't want to pass urine.

The pelvic floor muscles are a group of muscles that extend from your tailbone (coccyx) to your pubic bone at the front. These muscles support your pelvic contents (bladder, uterus and back passage) and most importantly, they control the openings of these organs. They also play a role in enhancing sexual satisfaction. Weakness of these muscles due to constant coughing will result in UI.

## What happens during coughing?

The abdominal muscles contract strongly during a cough. This increases the pressure on the bladder and pelvic floor. The pelvic floor muscles need to contract with **every** cough to prevent leakage. This process usually happens automatically.

The reason why patients with chronic coughing are at increased risk of leakage is not fully understood. Studies show that the muscles are usually strong enough, but sometimes they can't keep up with intense, prolonged coughing. **You should not avoid coughing** as this can lead to a build up of sputum in the lungs.

## What help is available?

Many people find it embarrassing to talk about urinary incontinence. The first step is to realise that you are not alone and to talk to your respiratory physiotherapist or specialist nurse as soon as you are aware of any problem. If the problem remains untreated it may get worse.

**Research has shown that by exercising your pelvic floor muscles you can stop and/or decrease the amount of leaking that you suffer while you cough.** Initial management of UI involves pelvic floor muscle training, neuromuscular stimulation (strengthening the muscles using a low level electrical current), biofeedback (using measuring devices to help train your muscles), vaginal cones (small weights), elevating devices and lifestyle advice, among others.

Your respiratory physiotherapist could refer you to a specialist continence physiotherapist for appropriate assessment and management.

## Airway clearance and coughing

It is essential that you are able to clear your chest effectively to minimise build up of infected respiratory secretions. It is important that urinary leakage does not interfere with your ability to do this.

Controlled coughing and modifying your airway clearance technique may help to prevent or minimise leakage. Good posture during airway clearance is essential. Research shows that the muscles involved in coughing and control of the pelvic floor work best with the spine straight and in an upright position. Your physiotherapist can help to select the best airway clearance technique and position for you.

## What help is available?

'The knack' is a technique where you tighten and lift the pelvic floor muscles before coughing, huffing, or sneezing to protect against leakage. It is very important that you are performing 'the knack' correctly and lifting the muscles, not pushing downwards.

You may need the help of a specialist continence physiotherapist to learn to do this. It is suggested that all patients with bronchiectasis should practice 'the knack', whether you leak or not.

## Exercise

Exercise is important to maintain fitness and helps to keep your chest clear of secretions. High impact exercise such as jumping, skipping and running may cause leakage. Extra care should be taken with these activities during and after puberty as risk of leakage may increase at this time.

For those who leak and wish to exercise on a trampoline, jogging on the trampoline will cause less strain on the pelvic floor muscles than jumping with both feet together. Talk to your physiotherapist if you intend to do weight training and abdominal toning (sit ups) programmes to ensure you are following a balanced exercise programme.

## **Even if you don't leak**

Ensure that you have good posture during airway clearance therapy and coughing. This will help the muscles that control coughing and continence to work most effectively.

Learn how to tighten and lift your pelvic floor muscles and get into the habit of practising 'the knack' routinely. Ask your physiotherapist if you would like advice about posture, pelvic floor exercises and 'the knack'.

## **What should I do next?**

Discuss the problem with your physiotherapist or respiratory nurse. Good posture, pelvic floor exercises and practising 'the knack' may help to control the symptoms of UI.

Effective sputum clearance is important and you may find pads useful to contain leakage during airway clearance and coughing. It is important to use pads specially designed for urinary leakage.

If your leakage persists despite using these techniques, continence specialists are available to provide advice, assessment and treatment of leakage and you can be referred to these teams via your GP, or your respiratory team.

## **Contact us**

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the physiotherapy department:

**Guy's** on **020 7188 5103** or **St Thomas'** on **020 7188 5094** (Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm)

## **Useful sources of information**

### **Pharmacy medicines helpline**

For information about any medicines that you have been prescribed at Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals, you can speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

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

### **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:

**e:** 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas' **t:** 020 7188 8803 at Guy's **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

### **Knowledge & Information Centre (KIC)**

For more information about health conditions, support groups and local services, or to search the internet and send emails, please visit the KIC on the Ground Floor, North Wing, St Thomas' Hospital.

**t:** 020 7188 3416

**Patient Transport Service** – If you need to use our patient transport service, a member of our team needs to assess whether you are eligible. This involves a brief telephone interview and is completely confidential. Assessments must be carried out at least 48 hours before your appointment. If you think you may be eligible for this transport service, please contact the Patient Transport Assessment Team.  
t: 020 7188 2888

### **Language support services**

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.

t: 020 7188 8815 fax: 020 7188 5953

**NHS Direct** – Offers health information and advice from specially trained nurses over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 0845 4647 w: [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.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](http://www.nhs.uk)

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