

Types and Symptoms of Incontinence

Incontinence is not a disorder, it is actually a symptom of various conditions, and has several possible causes.

Types of incontinence:

- Stress incontinence occurs when any movement that puts pressure on the bladder, such as coughing, sneezing, laughing, exercise, lifting, bending over, etc., causes small amounts of urine to leak. It occurs more often in women, and is usually caused by weakened muscles in the bladder and abdomen. Some causes of stress incontinence are heavy lifting, previous surgery, spinal cord injury, a lack of estrogen, and pregnancy.
- Urge incontinence (also called “overactive” or “spastic bladder”) is a sudden, uncontrollable urge to urinate followed by the release of urine, often a large amount. It is caused by a sudden, inappropriate, uncontrollable bladder contraction.
- Mixed incontinence is a combination of stress and urge incontinence.
- Overflow incontinence can occur when the bladder doesn’t empty completely during normal urination, and small amounts of urine leak or dribble out often and unexpectedly. This type can be caused by an obstructed flow or bladder muscles that do not contract fully.

Less common types of incontinence include:

- Functional incontinence: This occurs when physical disabilities, external obstacles, or problems in thinking or communicating prevent a person from getting to a bathroom before they urinate.
- Reflex incontinence (sometimes called unconscious incontinence): This occurs when a person is unaware of the need to urinate.
- Transient incontinence: This is caused by a temporary condition, such as an infection or medication.

Incontinence is more accurately defined as a symptom rather than a disorder, so treatment depends on the type, cause, and severity of the symptoms. Treatment options range from exercise and behavior modification to medication or even surgery. Surgery, however, is only recommended after other approaches have failed. Of course, the various approaches can be combined.

For more information on incontinence, please visit our website, urology.urmc.edu or talk to your physician about a referral. Please call (585) 275-2838 to make an appointment.