Urinary problems after prostate cancer treatment

The information in this factsheet will help you understand more about urinary problems that can occur after prostate cancer treatment. If you have prostate cancer you may like to read one of our free booklets on prostate cancer available from the Irish Cancer Society or talk to a specialist nurse on Freefone 1800 200 700.

Urinary problems and prostate cancer

Many men with early prostate cancer will not have experienced any urinary symptoms before prostate cancer treatment. Other men will have noticed a gradual lessening of the flow of urine or a need to pass urine more often.

Adjusting to urinary problems can be a difficult time both emotionally and physically. This factsheet aims to provide you with information which can help you at this time.

What urinary symptoms could I get?

Different treatments for prostate cancer can cause different urinary symptoms afterwards. Your control over passing urine can be affected or you could have trouble passing urine. These problems can include:

- Leaking urine.
- Passing urine frequently (more than 8 times a day).
- A sudden urge to go to the toilet quickly (urgency).
• Needing to go to the toilet quickly and leaking urine before you get there (urge incontinence)
• Difficulty emptying your bladder fully.
• Getting up more than twice at night to pass urine

**How can I help myself?**

There are a number of ways to help reduce the impact of urinary problems after treatment for prostate cancer. Different types of urinary problems are managed in different ways but making some changes to your lifestyle may help you to manage your urinary problems.

Here are some tips to help:

• Caffeine, found in tea, coffee, chocolate and cola may irritate your bladder. Try cutting down on them or change to decaffeinated drinks to see if this helps you.

• Alcohol can increase the amount of urine you produce so you may find cutting down on this helps, especially if you are troubled by getting up at night.

• Fizzy drinks, citrus, tomatoes and spicy foods affect some people – it may be worth avoiding them for a time to see if this helps you.

• Drink plenty of fluids every day to keep well hydrated – about 2 litres a day (average 6-8 cups per day). Not drinking enough will make your urine more acidic and this may irritate more.

• Keep a healthy weight for your height and eat a healthy balanced diet. Your diet should be rich in fibre to avoid constipation, as this can put pressure on your bladder and make urinary problems worse.

• Exercise regularly, exercise helps you to keep a healthy weight and helps bowel function too.

• Avoid constipation and don’t strain during a bowel movement.

**Radiation therapy and urinary symptoms**

Radiation treatment, such as radiotherapy or brachytherapy for prostate cancer can irritate and inflame both the bladder and the water pipe (urethra) and it can cause swelling in the water pipe too. This means you may need to pass urine more often, both day and night. You may have a burning sensation when you pass urine, or you may have some difficulty passing urine. These symptoms usually improve over the weeks or months following radiotherapy but can go on for longer in some men.

Radiotherapy can cause the bladder to shrink and become less ‘stretchy’ so it holds less urine. If this happens to you it may mean that you continue to need to pass urine frequently.

Occasionally radiation treatment causes a narrowing of the water pipe (urethra), known as a stricture. This can affect your flow of urine, making the stream weak and you may be unable to empty your bladder properly.

Rarely radiation treatment can cause leakage of urine; this is more likely if you have had previous surgery to your prostate gland.
Managing urinary symptoms after radiation therapy for prostate cancer

You may find that the tips on page 2 help you to manage your urinary problems.

If you have trouble with a slow flow of urine your doctor may give you tablets called an alpha blocker to help ease this problem.

If you are bothered by going to the toilet frequently, needing to go quickly or leaking before you get to the toilet your doctor may advise the lifestyle changes described above and may give you a tablet called an anti-cholinergic, as long as they are happy that you are able to empty your bladder fully.

If you develop a narrowing of your water pipe (urethra) you will notice a slowing of the stream of urine. You will need to see your urologist again and may need to have a short procedure to have this widened to allow you to pass urine more freely again.

A few men have blood in their urine after radiation therapy. You may find that this happens to you, sometimes years later. Do talk to your doctor about it – some simple investigations will be needed to make sure that the bleeding is not caused by something else. Often the bleeding is slight and no treatment is necessary, occasionally some treatment into the bladder is needed to try to stop the bleeding. Rarely a clot of blood can block your water pipe (urethra) and you will need to see a doctor quickly if this happens to you.

Practical tips

• Know where public toilets are before you need to go quickly.
• Make sure that you can reach the toilet easily and that your clothing can be easily undone.

Urinary Incontinence after prostate cancer surgery

Surgery to remove the whole prostate gland may mean that you have reduced control over the flow of urine.

Urinary incontinence is leakage of urine that you can’t control, this can vary from just a few drops when you cough, laugh or exercise or it can be a constant drip or trickle throughout the day.

After an operation to remove the prostate gland (radical prostatectomy) leakage of urine is a common side effect, particularly in the early weeks after surgery.

Straight after surgery most men will have some leakage of urine. Often this means needing to wear a pad. It is not possible to predict how much leakage you will have, or how long it will last.

Symptoms usually improve with time after your operation. Some men notice an improvement within weeks. More men notice an improvement by 3 to 6 months after the operation but some men have leakage of urine for a longer time.

As time goes on some men continue to get better, some suffer with leakage of urine associated with activity, such as coughing or straining to lift something or exercising and a small number have long-term urinary incontinence.

Sometimes after surgery to the prostate you can get a narrowing of the water pipe (urethra), known as a stricture. This can affect your flow of urine, making the stream weak and you may be unable to empty your bladder properly. If this happens to you, talk to your urologist.

After surgery for prostate cancer you will have a catheter in place for between 1 and 3 weeks. A catheter is a thin tube that drains urine from the bladder through the water pipe (urethra). After the catheter is removed many men suffer with leakage of urine for the first time.
How do I manage leakage of urine?

Many men need to wear a pad for some weeks or months. At this time you may find it easier to wear loose trousers which are not as restrictive as regular trousers in the early days.

Male incontinence pads are available in different shapes, sizes and levels of absorbency. Disposable pouches are available that can be worn inside underwear. More absorbent pads are also available for heavier leakage or for night-time. Net pants are available from pad suppliers - these can help to keep your pad securely in place.

There are other options which may be suitable such as external drainage system (urisheath) if your incontinence is severe and long-term. You can get advice on this from your doctor or nurse.

Practical tips

- Supportive underpants are better than boxer shorts at keeping pads in place.
- Plan ahead when you go out – pack a bag with pads, underwear and wipes and keep it with you or in your car.
- Make sure that you can reach the toilet easily – know where public toilets are before you need to go.
- Dark coloured trousers can be more practical than light colours if you are worried about urine leaks showing on your clothing.

Where do I get pads?

There are a number of manufacturers of male incontinence pads. Which brand you use is not important. You may need to get some different sizes and different absorbencies until you find which ones suit you best. You will also find that as your leakage reduces you can wear a smaller pad that holds less. Wear the smallest size pad that you need.

You may be able to get advice from your public health nurse or a continence adviser at your local health centre where the public health nurse is located who will show you ways to cope with incontinence.

Access to a public health nurse can vary depending on whether you hold a medical card but this varies from area to area so do ring and check the arrangements in your local area. Pads are available free of charge to medical card holders.

Most pharmacies can provide a supply of pads, although many will need to order them for you. It is best to talk to the pharmacy staff to find which one suits your needs. You may prefer to buy pad supplies by mail order or online. You will find a list of suppliers at the back of this factsheet.

Skincare – Hints and Tips

- Wash area with warm non perfumed soapy water, rinse and pat your skin dry, avoid rubbing the skin. Try to use a liquid soap with an in built moisturiser.
- Use an appropriate absorbent pad that keeps the urine away from your skin. Try to use a pad that is right for the amount of leakage that you have. Overuse of pads that hold more than you leak may cause dryness of your skin. If you develop any rash or redness of the skin use a water based protective skin cream and talk to your doctor or public health nurse.

Exercises to help control urinary flow

Incontinence can be very frustrating but usually will continue to improve a year or more after surgery. Doing pelvic floor or sphincter exercises may help to speed up the return of your urine control. Studies have also shown that some men with erectile dysfunction (impotence) have better function after carrying out pelvic floor exercises regularly.

You may want to seek advice from a healthcare professional, such as a physiotherapist or specialist nurse or continence advisor, on how to do these exercises correctly. Some hospitals have a physiotherapist with a special interest in male incontinence; ask your doctor if there is one in your hospital, or you can find a private
physiotherapist. Alternatively check with your doctor or public health nurse if there is a local continence advisory service who can support you. See our useful information section at the end of this factsheet for details on the ISCP who can help you find a local physiotherapist.

Which muscles should I exercise?

The pelvic floor is a hammock of muscles that supports the bowel and bladder in your abdomen. They also control the emptying of your bladder and bowel.

1. To find these muscles, start by sitting or lying comfortably with the muscles of your thighs, buttocks and abdomen relaxed.

2. Tighten the ring of muscle around your back passage, as if you are trying to stop passing wind. Try not to tense your abdomen or buttocks.

3. To feel the muscles around your urethra, imagine that you are passing urine and trying to stop the flow midstream and then restarting.

4. To check that you have found the right muscles, try stopping and starting your flow while passing urine. (This is a test only. Doing it often may interfere with how the bladder works normally.) You should then feel a definite lift and squeeze action of your pelvic floor muscles.

How often should I do the exercises?

Now that you have found the muscles you can begin to exercise them. Start the exercises lying down, and then move to sitting, then standing and walking while doing your daily activities. You can do them when watching TV, brushing your teeth or sitting at your desk at work. If you want to improve the strength and bulk of the muscle, you really need to make an effort to keep up the exercises.

- Squeeze and draw in the muscles around your back passage and water pipe (urethra), tightening and lifting up the muscles inside. Don’t hold your breath! Try not to tighten your buttocks or thighs.

- Do a test squeeze – Count how long you can hold a strong squeeze before your muscles start to tire and ‘flicker’. This will be the measure of your baseline hold, to decide how long you hold the squeeze for when you do your exercises. You may find you can hold for between 5 and 10 seconds, each man is different.

- Wait 10 seconds and repeat the squeeze or ‘lift’ – hold for as many seconds as you managed on your test squeeze.

- Repeat this up to a limit of 8-10 squeezes.

- Follow this by doing 5-10 short, strong squeezes quickly one after another.

- Aim to slowly increase the number of seconds you hold the contraction to 10 seconds over the coming weeks.

- If your muscle gets tired and ‘flickers’ or you cannot hold the contraction strongly reduce the length of squeeze and number of times you repeat the exercise to a level you can manage. Build this up slowly.

- Do the whole exercise routine two to three times a day.
Regular training using these exercises will build up your muscles. It will take some weeks to notice an improvement. When you have recovered control, you should continue doing the exercises twice a day for life.

Hints and Tips

Squeezing your pelvic floor muscles before you cough, sneeze or laugh can help to reduce leakage. This is known as the ‘knack’. It aims to help prevent you leak by squeezing your muscles before you do an activity likely to make leakage worse.

You should squeeze your pelvic floor muscles before and during strenuous activities to help prevent leakage of urine. You should gently squeeze the muscles at half your strongest squeeze when you are walking. This encourages the muscles to work during activity.

Most men find that urinary incontinence is worse towards the end of the day and this exercise helps to reduce muscle fatigue.

You can use a strong pelvic floor squeeze to reduce a sudden urge to empty the bladder. Over time this may help to reduce how often you need to pass urine.

After you have passed urine, squeeze your pelvic floor muscles strongly to avoid after-dribble. If dribbling persists, massaging or ‘milking’ the water pipe (urethra) behind the scrotum can help to remove the last few drops that often dribble out a minute or so after you have passed urine.

Surgical treatments for Urinary Incontinence

If your incontinence continues for more than 12-18 months your urologist may discuss further treatments to help you.

The options available to you will depend on the amount of leakage that you have.

Artificial Urinary Sphincter

This is suitable for severe incontinence. It is an operation to put a mechanical device with an inflatable cuff around your water pipe (urethra).

The cuff comes with a balloon and a small pump which is put into your scrotum. You squeeze the pump when you need to pass urine and the cuff deflates for a short time to allow your bladder to empty.

Your urologist will discuss the risks and advantages and disadvantages of this operation with you.

Internal Sling

If you leak a moderate amount one option for you might be to have a smaller operation to have an internal sling inserted. A sling is a small piece of material that presses your water pipe (urethra) closed to try to stop urine leaking out, without squeezing it so tight that you cannot pass urine properly.

The success of this operation varies, for some men it will reduce their leakage so they do not need to wear pads, for others it reduces their leakage but they still need to use some pads.

Your urologist will discuss the advantages and disadvantages and risks of this operation with you.

Bulking Agents

This may be useful for men who leak a small amount. It involves injecting material around the inside of your water pipe (urethra) to fill out the lining to help close over the opening a little. The success of this procedure is variable. The injections often need to be repeated at intervals. Your urologist will be able to advise you on whether it is suitable for you.

Emotional support

Many people feel embarrassed by incontinence and urinary problems, this is a common reaction. You may feel it affects how you feel about yourself and your dignity. If you have been through a prostate cancer diagnosis and treatment, and go on to suffer from urinary side-effects, it can be very distressing. It may also affect your relationship with others. But it is important to remember that you are not alone and help is available. It is best to discuss your worries and concerns with somebody, either a family member or doctor or nurse.
Travelling and urinary problems – Practical advice

A trip away when you have urinary difficulties may seem daunting – but with a little planning it is possible to have a break which can help you to feel a bit more relaxed.

Incontinence and urinary frequency can change the activities you want to take part in – so consider this before you book a trip, you may need to change the type of holiday you usually have.

You should make sure you pack a supply of equipment you use that will last the length of your trip – include pads and wipes in your hand luggage to make sure you are not left without in the event of a delay. You might want to keep a change of underwear or clothing nearby too.

If you go abroad you might consider taking a written list of what you need, think about translating it into the language of the country you are going to before you set off, if necessary. You can try using Google translate to do this for you, see the list of useful websites at the back of this factsheet.

It may be useful to buy a portable urinal if you are travelling a long distance by car and you may not be able to reach a toilet easily.

A supply of plastic bags can help you to keep pads dry, and to store wet pads before you can dispose of them or to keep wet clothing in if necessary.

If you are concerned about bed protection you can contact your accommodation before you go or take a protective sheet with you.

You might want to check on laundry facilities where you are going – or take a small supply of washing powder so you can wash small items of laundry if needed.

Pad Information

These websites have information about male incontinence products to help you choose when ordering, alternatively talk to your nurse or pharmacist for advice

Euron Product Information
www.euron-info.com

Molimed Pad Information
http://www.hartmanndirect.co.uk/ (product selector)

Tena Pad Information
www.tena.co.uk/men/products/

Mail order or online ordering

Corium Medical Product Supplier,  
Grattan House, City Junction Business Park,  
Malahide Road, Dublin 17.  
Tel: 01 866 1200  
www.coriumdirect.ie

Fleming Medical Ltd.  
Corcanree Business Park, Dock Road, Limerick.  
Tel: 1800 307 777  
www.flemingmedical.ie

Homecare Medical Supplies,  
Tooraree, Knock Road, Ballyhaunis, Co. Mayo.  
Tel: 1890 290 390  
www.homecaremedicalsupplies.ie

Inhealth Ltd.  
56 D Blackthorn Road, Sandyford,  
Dublin 18, Ireland.  
Tel: 01 874 8727 www.inhealth.ie

Liam Murray Chemist,  
20-21 Talbot Street, Dublin 1.  
Tel: 01 855 5733  
www.murrays.ie

Murrays Medical Equipment,  
Airton Park, Airton Road, Tallaght, Dublin 24.  
Tel: 01 463 6363 (Mail order/Retail sales)

The Mobility Shop, Clonminam Business Park,  
Portlaoise, Co. Laois.  
Tel: 057 866 6730  
www.themobilityshop.ie
HSE Continence Adviser

Check with your local health centre.

Useful Organisations / Websites

Assist Ireland
www.assistireland.ie
Tel: 0761 079200

Google translate
www.translate.google.com

Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists (ISCP)
Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland,
St Stephen’s Green,
Dublin 2.
Tel: (01) 402 2148
Email: info@iscp.ie
www.iscp.ie

www.bladderbowel.ie

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about urinary problems and prostate cancer, call the National Cancer Helpline Freefone

1800 200 700

(Monday-Thursday, 9am-7pm, Friday 9am-5pm) or email helpline@irishcancer.ie

Irish Cancer Society
43/45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
Tel: (01) 231 0500
Fax: (01) 231 0555
Website: www.cancer.ie

Men Against Cancer (MAC)
A support group for men diagnosed with prostate cancer
c/o Irish Cancer Society
43/45 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4
Freefone: 1800 200 700
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie
www.cancer.ie

Published by the Irish Cancer Society with assistance from members of National Nurse Continence Advisors Forum.

© Irish Cancer Society, 2012
Next revision due 2014