Urinary incontinence after radical prostatectomy

The information in this factsheet will help you understand more about urinary incontinence and the prostate gland. It is an agreed view on this condition by medical experts. We hope that it will answer some questions and concerns you may have. The information here is brief but more details are available from the Prostate Cancer Information Service on freefone 1800 380 380. If you have developed prostate cancer, a free booklet called *Understanding Prostate Cancer* is also available from the Irish Cancer Society.

**Why does urinary incontinence happen with prostate cancer?**
Urinary incontinence is the uncontrolled leakage of urine. After a radical prostatectomy (an operation to remove the prostate gland) stress incontinence is the most common urinary side-effect.

Surgery for prostate cancer affects the muscle at the top (apex) of the prostate that controls continence. This muscle is called the ‘urinary sphincter’. It is a ring of muscle that opens and closes the water passage (called the urethra). During surgery most of the urinary sphincter is removed. The amount left can vary and also depends on the length of sphincter which also varies between individuals. If the amount left is short, then incontinence is likely.

**What is stress incontinence?**
This is the leakage of urine due to a physical activity, such as coughing or straining to lift something. Stress incontinence can be very frustrating but usually will continue to improve for up to a year after surgery. Doing pelvic floor or sphincter exercises may help to speed up the return of urinary control.
Other treatments for prostate cancer, such as radiotherapy or brachytherapy, can irritate both the bladder and the urethra which in turn can cause inflammation or swelling of the prostate. It can in turn lead to urinary symptoms (see our factsheet on radiotherapy and the prostate).

An operation to make an artificial sphincter may be done in severe cases of stress incontinence.

A recent surgical option for men is to put a small sling around the urethra. This presses the urethra together and reduces the loss of urine due to stress incontinence. It gives extra strength to the urethra, which does not open until you want to pass urine.

Some drugs such as sedatives can affect how the bladder works. So it is important to discuss with your doctor any medications you are on before you start taking new ones.

Pelvic floor exercises for men

You can improve control of your bladder and bowel by doing exercises to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles and sphincter. Studies have also shown that men with erectile dysfunction (impotence) have better function after carrying out pelvic floor exercises regularly.

It is best to seek advice from a healthcare professional, such as a physiotherapist or specialist nurse, on how to do these exercises correctly. The exercises are most effective when they meet your needs.

Where are my pelvic floor muscles?

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.

- Cut down on drinks containing caffeine, such as tea, coffee, fizzy drinks and alcohol, as these can stimulate your bladder.
- Keep a healthy weight for your height.
- Drink plenty of fluids every day to keep yourself well hydrated.
- Eat a healthy balanced diet. It should be rich in fibre to avoid constipation, as this can put pressure on your bladder and make urinary problems worse.
- Exercise regularly, as it will help you to keep a healthy weight and bowel function.
- Avoid skin irritation and/or odour with regular hygiene. Use a mild soap and gently pat the area dry.
- Make sure that you can reach the toilet easily and that your clothing can be easily undone.
- Get advice from the local HSE continence adviser, who may help you with lifestyle changes such as scheduled toilet trips or bladder training.
- Do pelvic floor and sphincter exercises regularly. These exercises can help to strengthen the urinary sphincter and pelvic floor muscles.
- Your doctor may prescribe or recommend medications to help with incontinence. These include anticholinergics which relax the bladder, reducing urgency and increasing the ability to hold on.
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 more 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 can I exercise my pelvic floor muscles?

Now that you can feel your pelvic floor 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 a great effort with the exercises.

- Tighten and draw in the muscles around your back passage and urethra, lifting the muscles up inside. Don’t hold your breath or tighten your tummy, buttocks or thighs.

- If possible, hold the contraction for a count of 10, then release and relax.

- Wait 10 seconds and repeat the ‘lift’.

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

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

- Do the whole exercise routine at least two to three times a day.

Regular training using these exercises will build up your pelvic floor muscles. It may take several weeks to notice an improvement. When you have recovered control, you should continue doing the exercises twice a day for life.

Are there any other times when I should do the exercises?

- The pelvic floor muscles should be tightened before and during strenuous activities. This can include coughing, sneezing and lifting. (This is known as the ‘knack’.)

- You should gently tighten the muscles at half the maximum when walking. This encourages the muscles to work during any activity. Most men find that urinary incontinence is worse towards the end of the day and this exercise helps to reduce muscle fatigue.

- Use a strong pelvic floor squeeze to reduce a sudden urge to empty the bladder. In time this will help reduce urinary frequency.

- After you have passed urine, tighten your pelvic floor muscles strongly to avoid after-dribble. If dribbling persists, massaging or ‘milking’ the urethra behind the scrotum may be very effective in removing the last few drops that often dribble out a minute or so after you have passed urine.

What else can I do to improve my pelvic floor muscles?

- Avoid constipation and prevent any straining during a bowel movement.

- Keep your weight within the right range for your height.

- Avoid lifting heavy loads.

How is incontinence managed after prostate surgery?

After surgery for prostate cancer you will have a catheter in place. A catheter is a thin tube that drains urine from the bladder through the water passage (urethra). After the catheter is removed, you might need to wear a pad for a few weeks until things settle down.
There are many incontinence products 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 night-time. Most pharmacies now supply a wide range of pads. You should also get advice from the continence adviser at your local HSE office (former health board), who will show you ways to cope with incontinence.

**Emotional support**

Many people feel embarrassed by incontinence and this is a common reaction. If you have been through a prostate cancer diagnosis and treatment, and go on to suffer from urinary side-effects, it be very distressing. It may also affect your relationships 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. It often helps to talk to someone from a support group such as Men Against Cancer (MAC) who may have gone through a similar experience.

*This factsheet has been produced in collaboration with the Irish Society of Urology.*

© Irish Cancer Society, 2007

---

**Further information**

For more information about urinary incontinence and prostate cancer, call the

**Prostate Cancer Information Service**

**Freefone**

1800 380 380

(Monday–Thursday, 9am–7pm, Fridays 9am–5pm)
or email prostate@irishcancer.ie for confidential advice from a prostate cancer information nurse.

Irish Cancer Society
43/45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4

Tel: (01) 231 0500
Fax: (01) 231 0555

Website: www.cancer.ie/prostate

**Men Against Cancer (MAC)**
c/o Irish Cancer Society
43/45 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4

**Freefone: 1800 380 380**

Email: support@irishcancer.ie

www.cancer.ie.

This is a support group for men diagnosed with prostate cancer.

**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

A list of physiotherapists who treat male incontinence is available from the ISCP office.

**HSE Continence Adviser**

Check with your local HSE office.