

Stress Urinary Incontinence

It is common but not normal



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Chapter 1 – What is Stress Urinary Incontinence?

Stress Urinary Incontinence (SUI) is the involuntary leakage of urine that occurs with activities that increase the pressure inside your abdomen such as sneezing, coughing, laughing, jumping, running and lifting.

It is reported that as many as 37% of women experience some form of incontinence. This is a LARGE percentage of the population.

Unfortunately, many women see this issue as a normal part of aging and just live with it. This is not the case. You don't have to just live with this problem. There are lots that can be done to help.

Many women feel embarrassed and anxious about this. They will often isolate themselves from friends and family and won't seek help.

With the correct treatment many women are able to manage their incontinence and consequently improve their overall well-being.



Chapter 2: What Causes Stress Urinary Incontinence?

One of the big contributors to why SUI develops is the effect that **pregnancy and childbirth** has on a women's body. There are several reasons why pregnancy and childbirth can contribute to SUI including:

- Damage to the pelvic floor muscles and connective tissue during delivery,
- Damage to the urethra during delivery,
- Nerve damage during delivery,
- The impact of the weight of the baby on the pelvic floor muscles and connective tissue during pregnancy.

Unfortunately, **age** is also a contributing factor to the development of SUI. Our overall strength is reduced and consequently the strength of our pelvic floor muscles is also reduced. We also see age related changes to the muscle that surrounds the urethra (the tube which urine passes through). This muscle also reduces in strength as we age.

There are also significant changes to our hormone levels through **menopause** which can also contribute. The reduction in oestrogen as women move through menopause can cause a thinning of the tissues within the vagina and a thinning of the lining of the urethra. This thinning can increase in risk of developing SUI.

Unfortunately, some women experience SUI when they are exercising. **Heavy lifting** is often an activity that can cause this leaking. Often these women are fit and healthy and have strong pelvic floor muscles. So why would these women experience leakage?? Often the cause is a lack of coordination of the pelvic floor muscles during the lifting exercise. It is essential that the pelvic floor muscles contract strongly to support the pelvic organs against the significant increase in pressure in the abdomen during the heavy lifting activity.

High impact exercise (running and jumping) is another form of exercise that can cause SUI. These symptoms can occur due to the impact of pregnancy and childbirth on the pelvic structures and the high impact exercise can be too much for the body to control against.

However, SUI can occur in young active women and athletes who have not had children. It is not totally understood why this occurs but a very plausible theory is that the high impact exercise causes changes to the ligaments and connective tissues within the pelvis and this change can result in SUI developing. Unfortunately, professional athletes (that participate in high impact sports) show a 2.5 fold increased risk of developing urinary incontinence than sedentary women.

Chronic coughing can also cause SUI. Coughing causes a large increase in the pressure within our abdomen and this pressure pushes down through the pelvic floor. When this is happening for extended periods of time it can begin to affect the pelvic floor's ability to function.

Obesity (BMI greater than 30) can also contribute to someone developing SUI. The extra weight that is carried through the pelvic organs (i.e. bladder and urethra) and the pelvic floor muscles overtime can cause these structures to stretch and consequently affect their ability to function properly.

Constipation is another issue that can lead to the development of SUI. Constipation significantly affects our pelvic floor muscles from being able to function properly. This reduction in their ability to function will affect their ability to control your continence.

Chapter 3 - Treatment for Stress Urinary Incontinence

There are 2 types of treatment available for SUI – conservative management and surgical management.

Conservative management should be explored first before surgery is considered. Conservative management involves seeing a Women's Health Physiotherapist.

The treatment options that the Women's Health Physiotherapist will explore with you can include:

- *Pelvic floor muscle training and exercise:* This will often include strength, endurance and coordination training for your pelvic floor muscles. It is also recommended to strengthen your core and glute (bottom) muscles in conjunction with your pelvic floor muscles,
- *Breathing control exercises:* coordinating our breath with our muscle control and activation is essential
- *Activity modification advice and education:* Our goal is to maintain activity so we won't be telling you not to exercise but we will have suggestions on how to remain active but reducing the impact on your pelvic floor and reducing your symptoms (especially while you are working on your pelvic floor muscle strength),
- *Support devices:* such as a vaginal pessary or coniform, can be helpful for some women,
- *Addressing Constipation:* It is essential to get any constipation issues sorted out as this will negatively affect your ability to perform your exercises,

As you can see this initial option does involve a lot of work from you but for many women it can result in avoiding surgery. I am sure that sounds good to you!

Surgical Management involves seeing a Gynaecologist or Urogynaecologist. There are a number of surgical options available for the management of SUI. If you think that this is the right option for you a thorough discussion with your Dr will take place on the best surgical option for you.

It is important that after your surgery you see a Women's Health Physiotherapist for rehabilitation. Yes, just like you would see a Physio after knee surgery for rehabilitation you need to see a Women's Health Physio for rehabilitation after your SUI surgery.



Chapter 4 - Exercise and Stress Urinary Incontinence

We have discussed that some forms of exercise can cause or worsen your SUI however, it is important that you understand that there are many physical and mental benefits of exercise and physical activity.

Experiencing SUI with exercise or activity should not be an excuse to avoid exercise. Working closely with a Women's Health Physiotherapist can help to individually design a program of exercise that won't cause your leakage to occur.

Generally higher impact exercise will be when you experience your leakage. Examples of higher impact exercise includes running, jumping, skipping and hopping. Leakage can also occur with heavy lifting exercises.



Sometimes we will recommend a break from these activities to help to settle symptoms or we might modify these activities so you can still participate in the activity with a variation on some of the specific exercises. For example, if you attend a weekly boot camp and notice that you leak when you do burpees, we are able to show you an alternate exercise that you can perform which won't cause any leakage.

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) recommends 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise per week. It is important to try to adhere to this. Exercise that shouldn't cause an increase in your leakage symptoms includes swimming, cycling (indoor or outdoor), walking, low impact resistance exercise or water aerobics.

Remember it is important to perform your pelvic floor exercises to help to prevent this from continuing or to help recover from surgery. It is important that you ensure you are performing your pelvic floor exercises correctly. A Women's Health Physiotherapist will be able to check this for you and prescribe you a specific program of strengthening, endurance and coordination exercises.



References:

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If you are struggling with Stress Urinary Incontinence we are here to help. To make an appointment call us on (02) 9960 3798 or email us at mosman@innovations.physio

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