

Urinary Incontinence in Runners

Have you recently given birth to a child and are now attempting to return to running? When you are 5 minutes into your run do you suddenly feel a trickle of warm fluid running down your leg and you know that it is more than sweat? Are you determined to shed the extra baby weight and in continuing to run you find your shorts drenched in urine by the end? Are you hesitant to return to an aerobic class or workouts at the gym because you fear losing control of your bladder? If so you are not alone. It is common to experience urinary incontinence after child birth. During pregnancy, labor, and delivery there is often trauma to the muscles and tissues that surround the bladder. The extra pressure exerted upon the bladder during running or aerobic activity is often too much stress for these tissues to absorb and the result is urinary leakage or incontinence. There is something you can do.

Urinary incontinence affects as many as 50% of all women. Urinary incontinence for runners may include a feeling of increased frequency or urgency to urinate as well as leakage. Urinary incontinence is common especially after pregnancy. Urinary incontinence can be affected by pelvic muscle weakness or imbalance between back, pelvic and abdominal musculature.

Urinary incontinence can hinder your progress as a runner and may even keep you from achieving running goals. Many women manage small leakage through absorbent pads, but help is available to correct or minimize the problem of urinary incontinence.

What can I do to help correct the problem?

The first step is completing pelvic floor exercises correctly and frequently. Providing that these exercises are completed correctly they can help to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles decreasing the symptoms of or eliminating incontinent episodes. Often women attempt pelvic floor exercises or Kegel exercises but are doing them incorrectly or not completing exercises frequently enough.

How do I complete pelvic floor exercises?

To begin sit stand or lie with your legs slightly apart. Relax your buttocks, abdominals, and thigh muscles. Now imagine you are stopping the flow of urine gently pulling your lower pelvic muscles up and in. Attempt several quick flick exercises contracting the muscles while breathing thinking “tighten release, tighten, release” 5-10 repetitions. Also attempt long duration hold beginning with 5 seconds and then releasing/relaxing muscles completely for 5 seconds. When you can complete 10 long duration holds of 5 seconds begin working your way up to 10 second holds, remembering to allow equal time for rest and contraction with these exercises. The most common mistake made when performing these exercises is holding your breath or using other muscles to complete the contraction.

It is important to completely relax abdominal, thigh and buttock muscles when performing these exercises to truly isolate the muscles of the pelvic floor.

What are some other ways to alleviate the problem?

Always use the restroom before embarking in physical activity or leaving the house.

Make it a habit to empty your bladder when your body tells you it is time, and avoid the urge to hold onto urine until it is absolutely necessary that you relieve yourself.

Drink water and non-caffeinated beverages! Do not limit your intake of fluids to reduce chances of an incontinent episode. Dehydration may contribute to urinary tract infections as well as poor sport performance. It is essential in all cases to maintain hydration through fluid consumption for runners and non-runners alike.

Keep caffeine and alcoholic beverages to a minimum or eliminate them entirely if you have a problem. Caffeine is present in coffee, tea, caffeinated soft drinks and chocolate and should be eliminated or decreased as it is a bladder and nervous system irritant. Alcohol consumption should also be monitored as it depresses the nervous system decreasing the awareness to pelvic musculature when urgency is occurring.

Where do I go from here?

Urinary incontinence is a common problem although it should not be viewed as “normal” with aging or after pregnancy. There is treatment beyond absorbent pads which can help you return to running without incontinent episodes. Consult your primary care physician, gynecologist, obstetrician, or urologist for further treatment options. Treatment may include pharmaceutical management, surgical intervention, or advanced strengthening and retraining of the pelvic floor muscles with the help of a physical therapist specializing in women’s health.