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What is incontinence?

Incontinence is the involuntary loss of control over proper bladder or bowel function. There are a variety of factors that can cause incontinence. Experts agree that incontinence affects millions of people, many of them women; however, it is difficult to obtain accurate data, as many people are reluctant to report the problem to their physician.

Types of Incontinence and Common Causes

Stress Incontinence

Stress incontinence is the involuntary expulsion of urine that occurs while coughing, sneezing, laughing or during physical activity. This is typically caused by a weakness in the pelvic floor muscles so that when there is increased abdominal pressure on the bladder (such as from coughing), the weak muscles allow urine to leak.

Causes: For women, weakened bladder muscles are often the result of pregnancy, childbirth or menopause. During pregnancy and childbirth, the bladder muscles may be stretched or damaged. During menopause, estrogen levels decrease and lower the pressure around the urethra, allowing urine to flow. For men stress incontinence may be caused by surgery, especially removal of part or all of the prostate gland.

Urge Incontinence

When nerve passages along the pathway from the bladder to the brain are damaged, it can cause a sudden, uncontrollable bladder contraction resulting in urine release before a person is able to reach a bathroom. This particular condition is a one of the primary symptoms of "overactive bladder syndrome" (OAB). Urge incontinence may occur during sleep, after drinking only a small amount of water, or from touching, or even hearing, running water.

Causes: Damaged nerves of the bladder, spinal cord or nervous system are often the cause of urge incontinence, and may be the result of stroke, dementia or diseases that affect the nervous system, such as multiple sclerosis or Parkinson's diseases.

Overflow Incontinence

Overflow incontinence is when the bladder cannot hold the amount of urine produced and is characterized by continual dribbling of urine, even after urinating.

Common Causes of Incontinence

Incontinence is frequently a symptom of another problem. Therefore, remediation depends on the successful treatment of the underlying illness or condition for which it is a symptom. When the ailment is irreversible, such as dementia or severe trauma, the only solution is a prophylactic measure to prevent seepage through some form of absorptive pad or undergarment.

- » childbirth or pregnancy
- » stroke
- » hysterectomy or prostatectomy
- » multiple sclerosis
- » injury to pelvic region, spinal cord or brain
- » diabetes
- » enlarged prostate
- » dementia

Causes: Weak bladder muscles may make it difficult for a person to expel urine from the bladder completely, so that it is always full. Or, damage to nerves or some diseases may prevent neurological signals from firing to alert the body that it's time to empty the bladder. Specific only to men, an enlarged prostate may restrict the flow of urine so that the bladder always retains urine and therefore overflows.

Fecal Incontinence

Fecal incontinence is the inability to control the passage of gas, liquid or solid stool, and is usually caused by several factors, rather than a single condition. In normal function, the rectum stretches to accommodate the storage of fecal matter. When it is time to have a bowel movement, nerves detect the expansion of the rectum and send a signal to the brain. The internal anal sphincter helps prevent leakage from the rectum, but these muscles relax when it is time to pass stool. Damage to or dysfunction of any of these nerves, muscles or the area may result in fecal incontinence.

Causes: Diseases that affect the nervous system, loss of muscle function due to surgery, trauma to the area or congenital birth defects, or laxative abuse may cause fecal incontinence. Fecal incontinence is a primary symptom in irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) and the latter stages of dementia.