

## Continence

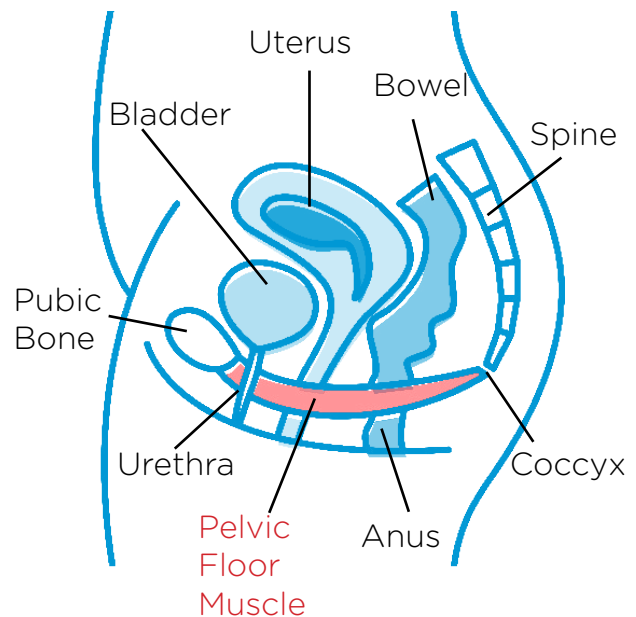
Many people with cystic fibrosis (CF) have weakened pelvic floor muscles which can lead to incontinence of the bladder and bowels. Although most common in women, men and children with CF are also at greater risk of experiencing incontinence than the general population.

Incontinence is the term that describes any accidental or involuntary leakage of urine from the bladder (urinary incontinence) or bowel motion, wind or faeces from the bowel (faecal or bowel incontinence). Incontinence in toddlers and young children is normal as they learn to take control of their bladder and bowel. See our [Toilet Training for CF Toddlers factsheet](#) for more information.

It is thought that urinary incontinence (UI) is under reported in the CF population as other health problems take priority. Embarrassment and a lack of knowledge about treatment options may also contribute to the level of under reporting. It is an issue which can be quite distressing and have a significant social and psychological impact, leading some people to change their exercise and physiotherapy habits. Incontinence can affect the ability to cough properly and clear secretions. If untreated, it can significantly impact long term health.

### What is the Pelvic Floor?

The pelvic floor muscles stretch from side to side across the base of the pelvis. They attach to the pubic bone in front, and to the tail bone or coccyx behind.



Their job is to support the pelvic organs and abdominal contents, including supporting the bladder to help it stay closed.

### Signs of a Pelvic Floor Problem

- Accidentally leaking urine during exercise, laughing, coughing or sneezing.
- Needing to go to the toilet in a hurry or not making it there in time.
- Constantly needing to go to the toilet.
- Finding it difficult to empty your bladder.
- Prolapse, a common condition where the pelvic organs protrude into the vagina or rectum.
- Pain in your pelvic area.
- Painful sex.

## Causes of Incontinence in CF

### Coughing

Coughing causes weakening of the pelvic floor muscles. Symptoms can be worse during an exacerbation of respiratory symptoms.

### Poor Nutrition

Poor nutrition can lead to general muscle weakness and loss of muscle bulk, including pelvic floor muscles.

### Constipation

Constipation increases pressure inside the abdomen and adds pressure to pelvic floor muscles, resulting in weakening. Straining when emptying your bowel also contributes to UI as this weakens the pelvic floor muscles.

## Steps to Prevent Incontinence

### Pelvic Floor Muscle Training (PFMT)

- Practice pelvic floor exercises regularly. Go to [Pelvic Floor First](#) for specific techniques.
- Tightening and lifting the pelvic floor before coughing, huffing or sneezing can help prevent leakage.

### Good Toilet Habits

- Only go to the toilet when you need to go, not 'just in case.'
- It is normal to go 4-6 times during the day and once at night.
- Sit correctly on the toilet- sit forward, relax the tummy, don't strain. Take your time to ensure your bladder is empty.
- Avoid constipation.

### Keep Well Hydrated

- Adults should drink 1.5-2 litres of fluid a day and more when exercising.
- Cut down on alcohol and caffeine that can irritate the bladder.

### Eat a Healthy Diet

- Include lots of fibre, fruit and vegetables.

- Match enzymes correctly to prevent diarrhoea and constipation.

### Exercise

- Discuss exercise with your physiotherapist for tips on protecting your pelvic floor; especially if you are weight training and/or high impact training.

### Airway Clearance and Coughing

- It is important that you do airway clearance to reduce the build-up of mucus. Use the "huff" technique to reduce the need for coughing.

## Seeking Help

It is important to talk to your CF team if you have any bladder or bowel control problems, as they have good knowledge of your health history, including any surgery or medications, which may predispose you to developing incontinence. They can also refer you to a continence specialist if required.

## Useful Resources

- [Pelvic Floor First](#)
- [Continence Foundation of Australia](#)
- [CFFit: Exercise and CF \(CFWA\)](#)
- [Toilet Training For CF Toddlers factsheet \(CFWA\)](#)

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