

Continence

Some people with CF have weakened pelvic floor muscles which can lead to incontinence of the bladder and bowels. Although more 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).

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.

Causes of incontinence

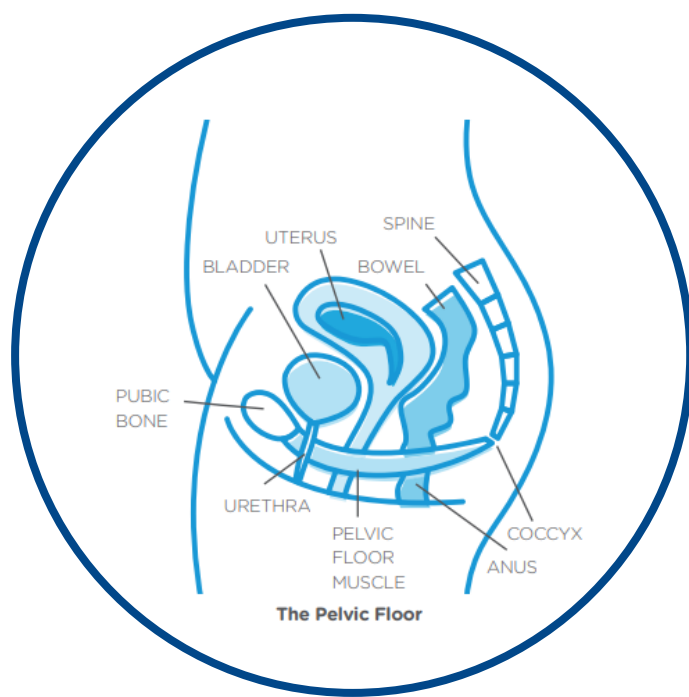
The causes of incontinence in people with CF are mainly due to how CF affects the body, rather than an issue with the bladder itself. Common causes include:

Coughing

The pressure caused by coughing causes fatigue, and over time, weakening of the pelvic floor muscles. Symptoms can be worse during an exacerbation of respiratory symptoms.

Poor nutrition

Malabsorption of nutrients 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 incontinence as this weakens the pelvic floor muscles.

Signs of a pelvic floor problem

- Accidental urine leakage 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.

Steps to prevent incontinence

Pelvic Floor Muscle Training

Practice pelvic floor exercises regularly. 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.'
- 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 2-4 litres of fluid a day and more when exercising. Also try to cut down on alcohol and caffeine that can irritate the bladder.

Eat a Healthy Diet

Include lots of fibre, fruit and vegetables, and make sure to match enzymes correctly to prevent diarrhoea or constipation.

Exercise

Talk to your physiotherapist about protecting your pelvic floor during exercise; especially if you are weight training and/or high impact training.

Airway Clearance Techniques

Controlled coughing and modifying your airway clearance technique may help to prevent or minimise leakage. Work with your CF physio on this.

Seeking help

It is thought that urinary incontinence 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.

It is important to talk to your CF team if you have any bladder or bowel control problems, as they will be able to offer support. They can also refer you to a continence specialist if required.

Useful resources

- [Urinary Incontinence and CF](#) (PCH)
- [Pelvic Floor First](#)
- [Continence Health Australia](#)