It's time to talk about SUI.

A PATIENT’S GUIDE

1 in 3 women experience Stress Urinary Incontinence.

Urology Care Foundation™
The Official Foundation of the American Urological Association
Get the facts.

This Patient’s Guide is intended as a public resource on the issue of Stress Urinary Incontinence (SUI) in women. The information contained in the Guide is derived from Stress Urinary Incontinence: Monograph from the Urology Care Foundation (formerly the AUA Foundation) and the AUA Guideline for the Surgical Management of Stress Urinary Incontinence: 2009 Update. Readers are encouraged to visit UrologyHealth.org to read these and other resources for SUI.
What is Stress Urinary Incontinence?

Stress Urinary Incontinence (SUI) is a common medical condition. It involves the involuntary loss of urine that occurs when the forces on the bladder are increased during physical movement of the body. SUI is different from overactive bladder (OAB, also known as urge incontinence), which is the strong, sudden urge to urinate at unexpected times.

SUI is the most common form of incontinence (or leaking urine) in women. Approximately 1 in 3 women will experience some form of Stress Urinary Incontinence during their lifetime. Defined as an involuntary loss of urine, SUI can occur when you cough, sneeze, laugh, exercise and sometimes when simply standing up. There is nothing to be embarrassed about if you have this condition and, as your own best advocate, you need to take charge of your urologic health. There are many factors associated with SUI – knowing what to look for and what to expect will help you manage your SUI. The good news is there are treatments that can help.

SUI Triggers

Mild incontinence is often triggered by vigorous activity such as exercise or from sneezing, laughing, coughing or lifting. Moderate/more severe incontinence occurs with any type of small movement such as standing up, walking or bending over.

SUI Risk Factors

It is important to know the risk factors for SUI and what you can do to prepare yourself. At the top of the list is being female – you’re at a higher risk for developing SUI by nature of your gender. SUI is more common among older women but is not caused simply by aging since it occurs in younger, active, healthy women as well. Caucasian or Hispanic race, being overweight or obese, smoking, and chronic cough (which places frequent strain on the pelvic floor muscles that can, in turn, cause bladder leakage) are also risk factors for development of SUI. Pregnancy and childbirth increase
the chances of SUI because they may stretch, weaken, or damage the pelvic floor muscles, resulting in bladder leakage. Nerve injuries to the lower back and pelvic surgery are also potential risk factors for development of SUI because they weaken the pelvic floor muscles. If you have any of these risk factors, you might experience symptoms of SUI.

**SUI Myths**
There is a lot of misinformation on SUI and educating yourself on what is and is not true will help empower you. Some of the myths you may encounter are:

- It is part of being a woman.
- It is hereditary. My mom had it and so will I.
- I could have prevented it.

SUI can range from mild loss of urine to severe urine loss and the impact it has on a woman’s daily life is a determining factor on which treatment she selects, if any at all. You may want to ask yourself a few questions to help determine the impact SUI might be having on your life:

- Is SUI limiting my daily activities?
- Have I stopped participating in activities because I am afraid I will leak?
- Have I become uncomfortable with my body because of the leaking?
- Am I avoiding sex because I am afraid I will leak?
- Have I stopped exercising?

If you find that you are answering ‘yes’ to these questions, you need to speak to your health care provider to find out what treatment is best for you. Educate yourself, be ready to ask questions and above all, do not be embarrassed. You are not alone – and your health care provider can help.
How is SUI Diagnosed?

Your health care provider will use several methods to diagnose your SUI, starting with your own experiences regarding SUI episodes you’ve had leading up to your appointment. It is helpful to keep a bladder diary before your appointment, keeping a record of your fluid intake and incidents that occur – including what was happening when the leakage occurred (exercising, coughing, sneezing, etc.).

Your health care provider will review your medical history, conduct a physical exam, and may conduct other tests to determine the cause of your urine leakage.

Visit UrologyHealth.org for an easy self-assessment tool that may help you determine if you have SUI.
Your Medical History

Your health care provider may ask you about your leakage occurrences, what you were doing when they occurred and how these made you feel. Your complete medical history will also help determine if there are other factors that should be considered as a possible cause of SUI. Do not be embarrassed when answering the questions or giving your medical history. The health care provider is there to help, not judge you. This information is important to help find the best treatment for you.

The Physical Exam

Your health care provider may likely give you a pelvic exam to determine the level of strength or weakness of your pelvic floor muscles and sphincter along with checking your overall health. You might be asked to wear a pad while doing an activity or exercising to determine the amount of leakage that occurs during physical activity.

If you haven’t already started one, you might be asked to keep a bladder diary to record your leakage episodes. This can be a helpful tool in determining why and when your leakage occurs and what you might be able to change in your everyday life to decrease these episodes.

Your health care provider might perform a test to determine at what stage of pressure your full bladder begins to leak and how your bladder empties. It is called a urodynamics test. Once again, there is nothing to be embarrassed about during this or any related test.
There are currently no approved medications in the United States for SUI but there are conservative and surgical options available to you. In talking with your health care provider, you can determine which course of treatment is better for you.

**CONSERVATIVE OPTIONS**

- **Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises**, also called Kegels: These are exercises designed to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles by contracting and relaxing these muscles. Pelvic floor muscles help support the bladder and other organs. By exercising your pelvic floor muscles and making them stronger, you can reduce or eliminate SUI related urine loss. Read the “Bladder Control: Strengthening Your Pelvic Floor Muscles” brochure from the Urology Care Foundation to learn more (found on UrologyHealth.org). Practice the exercises daily!

- **Lifestyle Changes**: By making a few changes in your everyday life, you can help reduce the impact SUI has on you. These include losing weight, stopping smoking and maintaining good overall health.
• **Medical Devices**, including occlusive devices or urethral inserts or patches: These help to reduce leakage at times of high activity and are placed directly in the urethra.

• **Absorbent Pads**: Treatments for SUI are not perfect. If a woman’s SUI cannot be resolved with conservative approaches such as pelvic floor muscle training and daily practice, lifestyle changes, urinary control devices, or surgery, it is recognized that she may need to rely on sanitary or incontinence pads from time to time. Pads may also be an appropriate strategy for women who are not bothered by their urinary leakage or who do not consider it to be a major problem in their life.

**SURGICAL OPTIONS**

If you and your health care provider decide on surgery, there are several options available to you. Here are some questions you can ask so you can make the best decision for you.

• Which surgery is best for me?
• What are the risks with surgery?
• Will surgery fix my SUI?
• How long is the recovery?
• Will my insurance pay for surgery?

Once you decide on having surgery to treat your SUI, you need to learn what procedures are available to you. Talk with your health care provider about each of these options, and learn more about the risks, recovery and results expected. Some surgical options include:

• **Urethral Bulking**: Materials, either synthetic (man-made) or biologic (natural) are injected into the layers of the urethra (the tube where urine leaves the bladder) to ‘bulk’ it up and help tighten the muscle valve. Bulking is performed under local anesthesia in the doctor’s office. It is less effective than the other surgeries but the recovery time is shorter than the other surgeries.
• **Slings:** This surgery can be done in about 30 minutes and does not require as much recovery time as bladder neck suspension surgery. A small incision is made in the vagina, and the sling is inserted under the urethra to give support to prevent leakage of urine. The sling can be made from biologic or synthetic materials, and recovery time for the sling surgery is shorter than that of the bladder neck suspension surgery. It is the most common of SUI surgeries.

• **Bladder Neck Suspension:** It is also called *retropubic suspension*. This surgery is not as common as 'sling' surgery. An incision is made on your lower abdomen and the neck of the bladder is sewn to the back of the pubic bone.
Who can help me understand SUI, get the best treatment and make a smart decision?

There are many health care providers who are qualified to help you. You might ask your urologist, primary care provider, nurse practitioner or physician assistant for some help in understanding SUI. Depending on their level of experience, they might offer some suggestions on how to treat your SUI or they might refer you to an incontinence specialist.

You do not have to live with urine leakage. Talk to your doctor today and make a decision that works for you. It’s time to talk about SUI!

For more information about Stress Urinary Incontinence and other urologic conditions please visit the Urology Care Foundation’s website, UrologyHealth.org.
About the Urology Care Foundation™

The Urology Care Foundation is committed to advancing urologic research and education. We collaborate with researchers, health care professionals, patients and caregivers to improve patients’ lives. The Urology Care Foundation is the official foundation of the American Urological Association (AUA) and was formerly known as the AUA Foundation.

The Foundation is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization and relies on donations to make publications and information such as this guide available to everyone. Please go to UrologyHealth.org/Donate today and make an online donation to help us continue this important work.
Thank you!

Urology Health Series:

Information is based on current medical and scientific knowledge. This is not a tool for self-diagnosis or a substitute for professional medical advice. It is not to be used or relied on for that purpose. Please see your urologist or health care provider regarding any health concerns and always consult with a health care professional before you start or stop any treatments, including medications.

For more copies of this and other materials about SUI, incontinence and other urologic conditions, visit UrologyHealth.org/Order or call 1-800-828-7866.

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