



# STARTING YOUR INCONTINENCE TREATMENT

**A Step-by-Step Guide**

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION



FOR CONTINENCE

**1-800-BLADDER**  
[www.NAFC.org](http://www.NAFC.org)

# STARTING YOUR INCONTINENCE TREATMENT

## A Step-by-Step Guide

### WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU FIRST REALIZE YOU HAVE INCONTINENCE

Having incontinence can be embarrassing, but there are things that you can do to improve your condition. If you've just realized you have incontinence, first understand that you're not alone – more than 25 million Americans suffer from incontinence. Second, know that this is exactly the place you should be. This step-by-step guide is designed to help you on your road to a solution. Follow the steps below to start taking charge of your incontinence.

#### STEP 1



### STEP 1: FIND AN IMMEDIATE WAY TO MANAGE YOUR CONDITION

Once you start treating your incontinence, it will take some time for you to see improvement in your condition. But, if you are experiencing incontinence for the first time in your life, you are likely looking for some immediate ways to manage it right now. You will be glad to know that

there is a wide range of products that can help you manage leaks, nighttime accidents and other symptoms.

#### ABSORBENT PRODUCTS

Check out your local drugstore or online retailer for a good absorbent product or collection device. There are hundreds of different products to choose from, and that means there's a good chance that there's something just right for you and your symptoms. You can learn more about the different types of products at <http://www.nafc.org/absorbents>.

As a first line of defense, an absorbent product is often all many people need to manage their incontinence for the first few weeks, and even indefinitely. After you've taken the steps below, you may want to reassess the products you are using and, if you feel that further assistance is needed, talk with your healthcare provider for additional recommendations.

While most absorbent products can be found at local retailers, you may feel more comfortable using a home delivery service. These services allow you to shop online and have the product discreetly shipped to your home. HDIS is one such service, and more information about them can be found at <http://www.hdis.com/>.

## KEEPING CLEAN

Incontinence can present some additional challenges when it comes to staying sanitary. Along with concerns about bedding and clothes, you'll also want to take active steps to keep your skin healthy. Fortunately, there are several different skin care products that may be right for you; for a detailed discussion of these, visit <https://www.nafc.org/skin-care>.

## STEP 2



### STEP 2: ASSESS YOUR CONDITION

Incontinence can happen for many reasons, and it can take on different forms. You may have bladder incontinence or fecal incontinence. It may stem from an injury or trauma, or it may be the result of a medical condition. It may be severe or mild. Regardless of why you have incontinence, knowing where you stand is the first step towards improving in your condition. Take some time – about 1 week – to really pay attention to the type of incontinence you have, and learn the things that trigger it. A great way to start is by keeping a diary of your bathroom habits.

If you have bladder incontinence, download a copy of the NFAC Bladder Diary at <http://tinyurl.com/bladderdiary>.

If you have fecal incontinence, download a copy of the NAFC Bowel Diary at <http://tinyurl.com/boweldiary>.

#### Week 1

Be sure to use the bladder/bowel diary faithfully for 1 week. The diary helps you keep track of the types of foods and fluids you're consuming, how much you're consuming, the number of times you've visited the restroom, if you've had any leakage, etc. It also tracks your activities to see what types of things might be triggering your incontinence (for example, running after you have just consumed a bottle of water.) Consistency is the key here, and it's important to fill out the diary every day for 1 week so you can start to see an accurate picture of your condition.

#### Week 2

Once you learn the types of things that trigger your incontinence, you'll be able to make modifications to your diet and activities, which may help tremendously. Continue to keep track of your bladder/bowel health for another week as you make modifications so you can see what changes are having an effect.

## STEP 3



### STEP 3: MEASURE YOUR PELVIC FLOOR STRENGTH

Your pelvic floor muscles are very important to your bladder and bowel health. The pelvic floor muscles extend from the inside of the pubic

bone to the anus and are woven around the vagina, urethra, and rectum, making them look almost like a basket. These muscles support your bladder and bowel, and can also help improve sexual sensation. Measuring your pelvic floor strength can be a challenging task without the help of a professional. But, it is a vital step, as it ensures you are self-aware of the muscles that you are going to be strengthening, and informs you of your “baseline” level of strength prior to beginning an exercise program. It also helps to ensure you are contracting your muscles correctly. Below are 3 ways you can assess your pelvic floor muscle strength. As you perform each exercise, jot down your perceived level of strength on a scale from 1 – 10, with 1 being the weakest and 10 being the strongest.

### **TAKE A LOOK**

This is the easiest way to examine your pelvic floor muscles. Sitting on the floor, with your back supported, prop your knees up so that your knees and hips are bent. Using a mirror, take a look at your vaginal and anal area. Contract your muscles as if you are trying to hold or stop a stream of urine. As you perform this exercise, you should see your muscles draw inwards and upwards, pulling away from the mirror.



### **FEEL FROM THE OUTSIDE**

Lie on your side, with one pillow under your head and another between your knees. Place your four fingers gently along the line of skin between the base of your spine and your back passage. Slowly tighten your pelvic floor muscles as you again imagine that you are trying to stop the flow of urine. This contraction may enable you to feel the area under your fingers tighten and lift.

### **FEEL FROM THE INSIDE**

Feeling from inside the vagina is the most accurate way of self-assessing your pelvic floor muscle strength. To begin, lie on your back or side, and, using a small amount of lubricant, insert your index finger into your vagina. Slowly bend your finger, and gently press onto the side of the vaginal wall. Contract your pelvic floor muscle by imagining that you are stopping the flow of urine. You should be able to feel a squeezing and lifting sensation around your finger. If, after performing these self-exams, you were able to see and feel your muscles contracting, congratulations! You are correctly contracting your pelvic floor muscles. File your self-assessment ratings away so that

you can refer to them in a few weeks. After you've been performing the exercises outlined in the next step for a few weeks, you will want to re-evaluate your strength by giving yourself a second examination. If you are not able to see or feel contractions, you may want to visit a physical therapist (PT) specially trained in pelvic floor disorders to assess your strength and ensure that you are performing the contractions correctly. An examination by a PT is easy and painless, and usually involves a procedure called biofeedback, which uses a sensor to measure muscle activity.

## STEP 4



### **STEP 4: START IMPLEMENTING EXERCISES TO STRENGTHEN YOUR PELVIC FLOOR**

Just like the other muscles in your body, your pelvic floor requires regular exercise to build up its strength. Incorporate the following exercises into your daily workout routine to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles.

#### **KEGELS**

There's a reason that you've heard again and again that kegels are important. This exercise has long been touted by professionals as one of the most vital exercises in increasing your pelvic floor strength. Follow the instructions below to be sure you're performing them correctly.

1. You've already identified your pelvic floor muscles in your self-evaluation, and those are the same ones you'll be working when you perform a kegel. To perform one contraction, imagine you are stopping the flow of urine, or preventing the passage of gas.
2. Starting with an empty bladder, your first goal should be to tighten your pelvic floor muscles for 5 seconds. Then relax them for 5 seconds. Try to do 5 repetitions on your first day. As you gain confidence from your new routine, aim for 10 seconds at a time, relaxing for 10 seconds between contractions.
3. Be careful not to flex the muscles in your abdomen, thighs or buttocks. Also, avoid holding your breath. Breathe freely during the exercises to keep from stressing the rest of your body.
4. Aim for at least 3 sets of 10 repetitions per day. The beauty of kegels is that they can be done anywhere, anytime. Try performing them during your downtime, such as when you're waiting in line or sitting at a stoplight.
5. Give yourself encouragement. These exercises will feel foreign in the beginning. But the longer you stay with this, the better your bladder health will become. As a bonus, Kegels have been reported to increase sexual pleasure as well.

To learn more about kegels and the variations of kegel exercises that you can perform, visit the NAFC website at <http://www.nafc.org/kegel>.

## SQUATS

Strong glutes and hamstrings are very important to the overall health of your pelvic floor. And one of the best exercises that develops these muscles is the deep squat. Squatting is actually one of the most natural forms of movement there is, however our modern-day lifestyle, characterized by long hours of sitting at a desk or on a couch, has made the squat virtually extinct. By strengthening your glutes and hamstrings, you'll be adding additional support to your pelvic floor. Follow the instructions below to make sure you are performing squats safely and correctly.



1. Stand with feet slightly wider than your hips, toes pointed slightly outward.
2. Keep your spine in a neutral position – don't round your back, and don't over accentuate the natural arch of your back.
3. Extend your arms out straight so they are parallel with the ground, palms facing down.
4. Balance your weight on the heels and the balls of your feet.
5. Taking a deep breath, begin sending your hips backwards as your knees begin to bend.
6. Keep your back straight and your chest and shoulders up.
7. Be sure to keep your knees directly in line with your feet as you squat.
8. Continue lowering your hips until they are slightly lower than your knees to perform a deep squat.
9. Use your core to push yourself back up, keeping your body weight in your heels.
10. Congratulations! You have just completed 1 rep!

It may help to watch yourself in a mirror as you first perform this exercise, as it is easy to perform squats incorrectly. Some things to watch for are not dropping low enough, leaning your body too far forward, allowing your knees to drift inward and performing the exercise too quickly. Aim to complete about 2-3 sets of 10 reps daily.

## **FINDING YOUR TA**

Your transverse abdominus, also known as the TA muscle, is the muscle that is located deep within your core, below the six-pack muscles. This muscle is often overlooked, but it serves a vital role. The TA muscle helps to stabilize the core, pelvis and lower back, and is recruited almost any time a movement is made. Strengthening your TA muscle will ensure that you are protecting your back and spine from extra force or pressure when you move, and will help aid in pelvic floor stabilization.

The following steps provide a very basic way to locate your TA muscle and give it a workout:

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent.
2. Place your hand on your stomach, just over your belly button.
3. Inhale.
4. While you exhale, tighten your stomach muscles and pull your belly button inward. You should imagine that you are tightening a corset and flattening your stomach.
5. Repeat 3 sets of 10 repetitions each.

Once you have a good feeling for where your TA muscle is and how to activate it, you can begin incorporating the action into your everyday life - while sitting at work, standing in line, etc. Also try to practice tightening your TA muscle like a brace every time you perform a movement such as lifting, sneezing, squatting, etc. With practice, this action can become automatic and will aid in your core stability.

## **THE SMALL BUT POWERFUL MULTIFIDUS**

The multifidus is one of the most important muscles in aiding spinal support. The muscles are attached to the spinal column and are called upon when bending backwards, turning, and bending side to side. These muscles work with the rest of your pelvic floor muscles and TA muscle to help you hold good posture and to stabilize your lower back and pelvis during movement. Try the exercise below to strengthen the multifidus muscle:

1. Lie on your stomach, with your forehead on your hands or a towel, looking straight down (not to the side).
2. Very slowly, rotate your pelvis back slightly so that your tailbone lifts toward the ceiling. This should be a very subtle movement.
3. Hold for one second, then rotate your pelvis back to the floor.
4. Complete 3 sets of 10 repetitions each.



Practice activating your multifidus muscle throughout your day by keeping good posture.

It's important to know that there is no "one" exercise alone that will strengthen your pelvic floor, as the pelvic floor is supported by many muscles. Visit a physical therapist trained in pelvic floor disorders to determine the best workout plan for your condition. Your physical therapist will also be able to ensure that you are performing the moves correctly so that you are getting the most out of your workout. As with all workout plans, it's best to check with your doctor before starting these workouts if you have any special conditions.

## STEP 5



### STEP 5: DEVELOP A VOIDING STRATEGY

How and when we use the restroom can have a big effect on our bodies and our incontinence. The way we position ourselves, how much we drink, when we drink and other factors can all play a role in our bathroom habits, so consider incorporating the following strategies in your daily routine:

#### VOIDING POSTURE

Did you know that our ancestors typically used a squatting position when eliminating? The squatting position is the most natural position to void, as it relaxes the pelvic floor, allowing for easier and more effective elimination. Yet due to the modern advances of toilets, it is more common for people to sit instead of squat. There is a simple solution, however. By utilizing a small foot stool when you use the restroom, you can position yourself in a "squatting" position, making it easier for you to eliminate. See [www.squattypotty.com](http://www.squattypotty.com) for stools specifically designed for this purpose (but know that any small foot stool will work, too).

#### BLADDER RETRAINING STRATEGIES.

Strengthening and training your bladder and sphincter muscles can help prevent you from running to the restroom every five minutes. There are a couple of ways you can do this:

1. Schedule Bathroom Visits. Once you've determined how frequently you use the bathroom, add 15 minutes to that time. Let's say you go to the bathroom every hour. During retraining, you will

aim to go every hour and fifteen minutes. Even if you don't have to go, you'll still want to make the trip to the bathroom. This trains the brain and body. After a set number of days, gradually increase the amount of time between bathroom breaks.

2. Delay Urination. Easier said than done. But when you feel the need to go, try holding off for at least 5 minutes. Then 10. And so on until you can make it 3-4 hours between urination. The key will be to stay on schedule, which keeps the training on track.

## **BOWEL RETRAINING STRATEGIES**

The idea of bowel retraining is to stimulate bowel movements so that your body begins to establish a more regular voiding pattern. Most people who initiate bowel retraining begin to see more regular patterns within a few weeks.

1. Insert a lubricated finger into the anus and make a circular motion until the sphincter relaxes. This may take a few minutes.
2. After you have done the stimulation, sit in a normal posture for a bowel movement. If you are able to walk, sit on the toilet or bedside commode. If you are confined to the bed, use a bedpan. Get into as close to a sitting position as possible, or use a left side lying position if you are unable to sit.
3. Try to get as much privacy as possible. Some people find that reading while sitting on the toilet helps them relax enough to have a bowel movement.
4. If digital stimulation does not produce a bowel movement within 20 minutes, repeat the procedure.
5. Try to contract the muscles of the abdomen and bear down while releasing the stool. Some people find it helpful to bend forward while bearing down. This increases the abdominal pressure and helps empty the bowel.
6. Perform digital stimulation every day until you establish a pattern of regular bowel movements.
7. You can also stimulate bowel movements by using a suppository (glycerin or bisacodyl) or a small enema. Some people drink warm prune juice or fruit nectar to stimulate bowel movements.

Like any training regimen, consistency is crucial for the success of a bowel retraining program. Establish a set time for daily bowel movements that fits into your schedule and one that will not be compromised. An optimal time is 20 to 40 minutes after a meal, as feeding stimulates bowel activity.

## STEP 6



### STEP 6: WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

Sometimes, even the most persistent plan of action may not alleviate the symptoms of incontinence. If after making behavioral modifications based on your triggers, completing 6-8 weeks of exercises and

retraining your bladder or bowel you are still struggling with managing your incontinence, it may be time to seek professional help through a physician or physical therapist.

Finding a qualified specialist near you is easy - simply use the NAFC Specialist Locator online at <https://nafc.squarespace.com/find-a-doctor>.

Be sure to bring your completed bladder or bowel diary, your plan of action and any other notes you may have about your self-management with you to your appointment. Your efforts will not have been in vain - in fact, all your records

will help paint a more accurate and personalized portrait of your condition for your doctor, which will help him or her create a customized treatment plan for you moving forward. Your doctor may recommend further evaluation or sessions with a physical therapist, and, in some cases, may even discuss surgical options.



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