



## Pregnancy and Incontinence

Pregnancy and childbirth can mean many changes (physically, emotionally, and hormonally) for a woman's body, including changes in urinary or fecal continence.

### What are Urinary and Fecal Incontinence?

**Urinary incontinence** generally means the leakage of urine at inappropriate times, and there are several types:

- **Stress urinary incontinence** is leakage of small amounts of urine when there is increased pressure on the bladder. This can happen with exercise or with sneezing, coughing, lifting or other activities, or during pregnancy. Stress incontinence is most prevalent during the pregnancy and postpartum period (following delivery) due to stress/pressure on the bladder and potential trauma to the pelvic floor muscle support during delivery.
- **Urge urinary incontinence** is the leakage of medium to large amounts of urine when a person feels a sudden strong urge to urinate.
- **Mixed Incontinence** includes symptoms of both stress and urge urinary incontinence.
- **Functional Incontinence** is urine leakage that occurs when a person cannot get to the toilet in time due to physical restriction.

**Fecal incontinence** is leakage of stool and is most common in the postpartum period when childbirth is complicated by tearing of the vaginal opening which extends to the anal sphincter.

### What Causes Pregnancy-related Incontinence?

Muscle weakness and imbalances, stress and pressure on the bladder, and potential trauma due to delivery all can contribute to incontinence issues in pregnancy and the postpartum period. Stress incontinence, the most common in pregnancy, usually results from weakness and lack of support in the muscles of the pelvic floor, increased pressure on the bladder from the expanding uterus, and hormonal changes affecting connective tissue strength.

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### How a Physical Therapist Can Help

A physical therapist can evaluate and design an individualized plan of care to help you gain control over your life and this issue. A physical therapist may also help you reduce and/or avoid the need for medications and/or surgery. Your treatment for incontinence may include:

- Education on diet and nutrition to avoid items that may irritate the bowel or bladder
- Advice on how to change behaviors that make symptoms worse
- Techniques to help you identify the right muscles and learn to use them correctly
- Exercises to strengthen the pelvic and anal muscles
- Exercises to stretch and strengthen other important muscles
- Biofeedback that shows you how to use your muscles effectively
- Electrical stimulation to improve awareness and strength of the muscles

**Find a physical therapist in your area at [www.moveforwardpt.com](http://www.moveforwardpt.com)**

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