

Bladder control and COVID-19

What you need to know

We now know that COVID-19 can affect the body in many different ways, including the urinary system. It is not uncommon for people recovering from COVID-19 to experience urinary problems such as an **uncontrollable need to urinate** (mictional urgency) or **involuntary leakage of urine** (urinary incontinence).

Approximately 14% of people who have had COVID-19 report bladder control problems.¹ In the general population, up to 33% of women and 16% of men over the age of 40 experience bladder leakage.² It is important to note that bladder leakage is not related to the normal aging process.²

How can COVID-19 cause urinary problems?

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are cough and fatigue.³ Both these symptoms can lead to a weakening of the pelvic floor muscles, the muscles that hold in urine. This can result in **small leaks during effort**, for example, during physical activity that increases pressure on the bladder (e.g., coughing, sneezing, standing up, lifting a heavy object or a person).⁴

The virus can also cause inflammation of:

- The bladder, causing it to become overactive;⁵
- The nerves in the bladder, which can become damaged, leading to incontinence.⁶

Some people who are recovering from COVID-19 complain of a **strong, uncontrollable urge to urinate**. This is called mictional urgency. Bladder leakage occurs when the person can't get to the bathroom in time. Some people may also need to urinate very often, even at night.

Other factors, in addition to COVID-19, can aggravate urinary problems. For example:

- Pregnancy, childbirth and hormonal changes;
- A medical condition (an infection or an operation);
- Certain medications.

What are the impacts of urinary problems?

In everyday life, the fear of bladder leakage often causes people to alter their behaviour and routine. Some people will plan their physical and social activities around their need to use the bathroom. Others may feel embarrassed or even ashamed and go out less as a result. This significantly affects their quality of life and can even lead to isolation.



How to reduce urinary problems?

Bladder retraining combined with habit changes can reduce mictional urgency

“A person who drinks five to eight cups of liquid per day should be able to wait at least two hours between bathroom visits. If you’re going to the bathroom more often, are getting up more than once or twice during the night, or can’t delay the urge to empty your bladder for at least 30 minutes, bladder retraining may be helpful.”²

Habit 1: Keep a regular bathroom schedule

Keeping a diary can help you keep track of how often you urinate, when you urinate, and any leaks or episodes of urgency. Combine this with drinking enough liquids. The general recommendations are to:

- Drink 1.5-2 litres of liquid per day;
- Limit your liquids* at certain times (e.g., before bed);
- Avoid drinks that irritate the bladder (e.g., coffee, tea).

*Note that the term “liquids” includes water, juice, tea, coffee, smoothies, milk, soup, and very juicy fruits such as watermelon.

Avoid becoming dehydrated, because highly concentrated urine can irritate the bladder and aggravate the feeling of urgency. Here is an example of a [voiding diary](#) (with guide) developed by the CHUM. There are also several mobile apps you can use.

Habit 2: Learn to control the urges

When an urge arises, suppress it by contracting your pelvic floor muscles several times in a row, quickly and powerfully. You can also try to distract yourself, for example, by counting backwards.

Train your pelvic floor muscles to reduce stress incontinence

Here are [3 Kegel exercises](#)⁷ to strengthen the muscles that hold in your urine. Doing these specific exercises on a regular basis will help strengthen your muscles.

First, you need to learn how to contract your pelvic floor muscles: Squeeze your muscles like you were trying to hold in urine or gas. If you feel your muscles being pulled inward, that’s a good contraction. For more information, here’s a helpful [guide](#) from the Canadian Continence Foundation.

If the problem persists or affects your daily activities, speak to a doctor or a physiotherapist specialized in perineal rehabilitation.

References:

1. Davis, H.E., Assaf, G.S., McCorkell, L., Wei, H., Low, R.J., Re'em, Y., et al. Characterizing Long COVID in an International Cohort: 7 Months of Symptoms and Their Impact. medRxiv. 1 Jan 2021;2020.12.24.20248802.
2. Gajewski, J., Harrison, G., Valiquette, L. The Source: Your Guide to Better Bladder Control [online]. Canadian Continence Foundation; 2018. Available at: <https://www.canadiancontinence.ca/pdfs/Source-2018/The-Source-2018-English.pdf>
3. World Health Organization. Coronavirus - Symptoms [online]. World Health Organization; 2022 [cited 28 Jan 2022]. Available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_3
4. Shenot, P. Urinary Incontinence in Adults. Merck Manual [online]. 2020. Available at: <https://www.merckmanuals.com/en-ca/professional/genitourinary-disorders/voiding-disorders/urinary-incontinence-in-adults>
5. Frellick, M. New-Onset Bladder Symptoms in Discharged COVID Patients. 2021. Available at: <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/958525>
6. Pourfridoni, M., Pajokh, M., Seyedi, F. Bladder and Bowel Incontinence in COVID-19. J Med Virol. 2021/02/19 Ed. May 2021;93(5):2609 10.
7. Prévenir et traiter l'incontinence urinaire chez la femme et chez l'homme [online]. Centre de littérature en santé du CHUM. Available at: <https://www.chumontreal.qc.ca/fiche/prevenir-et-traiter-lincontinence-urinaire-chez-la-femme> | <https://www.chumontreal.qc.ca/fiche/prevenir-et-traiter-lincontinence-urinaire-chez-lhomme>

If you have questions about long COVID, please email us at: readaptation.covid.cisssmo16@ssss.gouv.qc.ca.

Our mission

To maintain, improve, and restore the health and well-being of the Québec population by making accessible an array of integrated and quality health and social services, while contributing to the social and economic development of Québec.

Our vision

Accessible and efficient health care and services that adapt to the needs of Québécois.

Our goals

The CISSS de la Montérégie-Ouest achieves its goals through its innovative approaches and stands apart through:

- its exemplary offer of care and integrated services based on interdisciplinarity, accessibility, and adaptability to the needs of its population;
- its willingness to question and improve its professional, clinical, and administrative practices;
- its appreciation of its personnel and the implementation of human resource management practices;
- its strong relationships with its partners.

Our values

Our actions are guided by five equal and interconnected values: compassion, collaboration, commitment, confidence and consistency.