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# Staying Dry:

Good bladder habits for your child

Developed by the health care professionals of Urology Department with assistance from the Department of Learning and Development.

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4480 Oak Street, Vancouver B.C, V6H 3N1, 604-875-2345

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*Editor's note: I will use pronouns such as "he" and "she" alternately. When you read the brochure, please correct the pronouns for your child.*

Your child has visited the Urology Clinic because she has problems with voiding (urinating or 'peeing'), or she has problems with bladder control (controlling when she needs to urinate).

### **What are the signs of a child who has voiding problems?**

- Has wet or damp underwear during the day or night.
- Needs to urinate often and has to go immediately.
- Holds urine for long periods of time.
- Gets urinary tract infections (bacterial infections within the urinary system).
- Is constipated (has trouble having a bowel movement or 'pooping').

### **How does the bladder work?**

The **bladder** is part of the **urinary system**. The purpose of the urinary system is to remove wastes from the body by making urine. Two **kidneys** remove waste from the blood and produce urine. The urine flows from the kidneys to the bladder through tubes called **ureters**. The bladder is like a big muscular bag. Urine is held in the bladder by a strong band of muscle called the **sphincter muscle**. When the

bladder is full, it sends a message to the brain. The brain decides whether it is a good time for the bladder to empty. If and when it is, the brain sends a message down to the sphincter muscle to tell it to relax. The urine then flows out of the body through a tube call the **urethra**.

As we get older we learn to hold and release urine by controlling our bladder and sphincter muscles. A child who learns this control is “toilet trained.” Children gain control over their bladders at different ages. Most children have control by age four or five.

Some children have difficulty emptying their bladders. There are many things that can cause children to have this problem. These are listed below:

- Some children have an overactive bladder. These children have bladders that feel full more often than other children. Their bladder muscle may contract (send the signal that it is full) without the child wanting it to. Some children try to delay this frequent need to urinate by putting pressure on their sphincter muscle (e.g. crossing legs, holding genitals with hand). This action causes a lot of pressure in the bladder. Over time, this pressure can lead to bladder and kidney damage.
- Some children can hold a large amount of urine in their bladder. The bladder overfills and the bladder muscles get stretched. Over time, the muscles become weak and flabby, just like a piece of elastic that has been stretched too far for too long. When this happens, the bladder muscles send a weaker signal to the brain. It becomes easier for these children to not get the message that they need to urinate. Their bladder is so stretched that it cannot hold any more urine. These children begin to leak urine before they can get to the bathroom.

- Some children are not able to relax their sphincter muscle when they try to urinate. The child tightens the sphincter muscle as the bladder contracts. This causes a lot of pressure in the bladder. The high pressure in the bladder may cause the urine to go backwards (reflux) up the ureters and cause kidney damage. Over time, the muscles in the walls of the bladder have had too much exercise. They become very thick and the bladder has very strong contractions. These contractions send messages to the brain that tell the child that they need to urinate and the child feels a strong need to urinate often and urgently. Wet underwear is common with these children. Often, the bladder does not empty completely. The bladder gets full more quickly and causes the child to urinate more frequently. Wet underwear and urine that is left in the bladder is an ideal place for bacteria to grow. This increases the chances for your child to get a **urinary tract infection**.

## How can I help my child get better control of his bladder?

This is not an easy problem to correct. It takes understanding, hard work, time and patience from both you and your child. The place to start is with a program that helps the bladder work well. Here the basic steps of the program.

### 1. Drinking Water

Water is the best drink you can give your child. She should drink the same number of cups of water a day as her age. For example, a six-year old should drink six glasses of water a day. After age nine, he should drink between eight to ten glasses of water a day.



*Encourage your child to drink lots of water. Try to help them make it a habit.*

### 2. Voiding More Often

Try to get your child to sit on the toilet at regular times to help them to remember to urinate more often.

*Encourage your child to go to the bathroom whenever they have a break. Ask them to do this even if they don't feel like they have to "go".*



Ask your child to urinate **first thing in the morning** when they wake up. This is important even if they do not feel like they have to urinate.

Start a schedule where your child sits on the toilet **every two hours** throughout the day. Do this even if they do not feel like they have to urinate. These times often coordinate with breaks in the day like recess, lunch, and in the afternoon before she comes home from school.

If your child feels the urge to go to the bathroom before the two-hour period is up, he should go. You should not let him put off urinating.

When your child sits on the toilet, ask her to pull her underwear down to her ankles instead of her knees. This helps her to sit for longer. Your child should feel comfortable on the toilet. If he is small, get a footstool for him to put his feet on.

Little girls tend to sit on the toilet with knees touching. Ask your daughter to sit on the toilet with her legs apart. This prevents urine from dribbling into her vagina and starting an infection. If she has trouble sitting on the toilet with her legs apart, have her turn around and face the back of the toilet when voiding.

You need to tell your child's teacher or his other caregivers (ex: babysitters, preschool leaders) about his bladder program so they can support it too. If you need to, send a letter to the school telling them that your child has been seen in the **urology clinic**. Tell them that your child needs to have a water bottle on his desk and he needs to be excused every two hours (or more) to use the washroom.

### 3. Avoiding Constipation

When your child is constipated it is hard for her to empty her bladder completely. While bowel habits may vary, most children will have one bulky bowel movement every day. There are many ways that you can help your child have regular bowel movements.



*Give your child foods that are high in fiber like raisins, fresh fruits and vegetables or whole grain unsweetened cereals.*

- Increase the amount of fiber in your child's diet. Fiber is a type of nutrient. Fiber helps make your child's stool ('poop') soft and bulkier. You can find out how much fiber is in your food by reading the food label. Foods that are high in fiber have 3 or more grams of fiber in each serving. Foods high in fiber that can help are whole grain breads and cereals, fruit (especially fruit with skin such as an apple) vegetables and wheat bran. Some examples of good snacks for children that are high in fiber are bran cereals, raisins, apples and raw carrots.
- If you are increasing the amount of fiber in your child's diet, you should also make sure that she drinks a lot of water. Too much fiber without water can cause her stool to become hard.
- Some food can cause constipation. Some examples are white bread, white pasta, white rice, bananas, milk, cheese, deep fried foods, peanut butter, candy, chocolate and pastries. If your child is having a problem with constipation, you should try to limit these foods.

- Playing actively and moving helps your child to have regular bowel movements. Sitting a lot (watching a lot of TV or sitting at the computer) can cause the bowel to be lazy.

*Encourage an active lifestyle. Regular physical activity helps to establish regular bowel habits in children and adults.*



- In some cases, your doctor may suggest that you give your child a laxative. This is a medicine that you can buy without a prescription. Laxatives help to loosen the bowels and relieve constipation. There are many choices of laxatives. The one recommended will be best for your child. If your child needs a laxative, have her start it immediately. Follow the directions on the package carefully.
- Have your child sit on the toilet for 10 – 15 minutes every night after dinner and try to have a bowel movement, even if they do not have the urge to go. Your child should be seated comfortably with feet flat on the floor or supported with a footstool. It helps to bring a favorite book or a game to pass the time.

It takes many weeks and even months to get a stretched bowel to work well again. Be patient with yourself and your child.

#### 4. Keeping a diary

We suggest that you (or your child if they are old enough) keep a written diary of the amount of fluid your child drinks, when she voids and when she has a bowel movement. This will allow you and your child to see what her habits are like and what needs to be worked on.



*Keeping a written diary of your child's eating and bowel habits will help solve problems if there are any. Bring this diary every time you have an appointment to deal with your child's bladder problems.*

Always use lots of praise and encouragement about your child's efforts to stay dry. Sometimes other rewards like stickers can help too.

**Remember...** This program takes time and hard work. You and your child may become frustrated and irritable at times. If this happens, sometimes it is best to take the day off and start fresh tomorrow.

You may be asked to try this plan with your child for three months. If you have any questions or need some support, call the urology nurse clinician at 604-875-2889.