

Biofeedback & Pelvic Floor Stimulation

Strategies to improve bladder function

A smiling woman with curly hair, wearing a red top, is sitting at a table outdoors. The background is blurred, showing greenery and a building.

READY FOR DRIER
DAYS & NIGHTS?

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION



FOR CONTINENCE

Strategies To Improve Bladder Function

READY FOR DRIER DAYS & NIGHTS?

BIOFEEDBACK & PELVIC FLOOR STIMULATION COULD HELP YOU GET THERE

Too many people struggling with urinary incontinence think that wetness is something they just have to live with. That it's a normal part of the aging process and there's little they can do about it. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are actually a number of treatment options and techniques that can make a real difference in your life, including a pair of therapies that are often used in coordination with one another: biofeedback and pelvic floor stimulation.

Both of these have been used for decades to help produce real, meaningful improvements in bladder function. What's even better is that they're less invasive than surgery, and they don't have the side effects often associated with medication.

BIOFEEDBACK

What is Biofeedback?

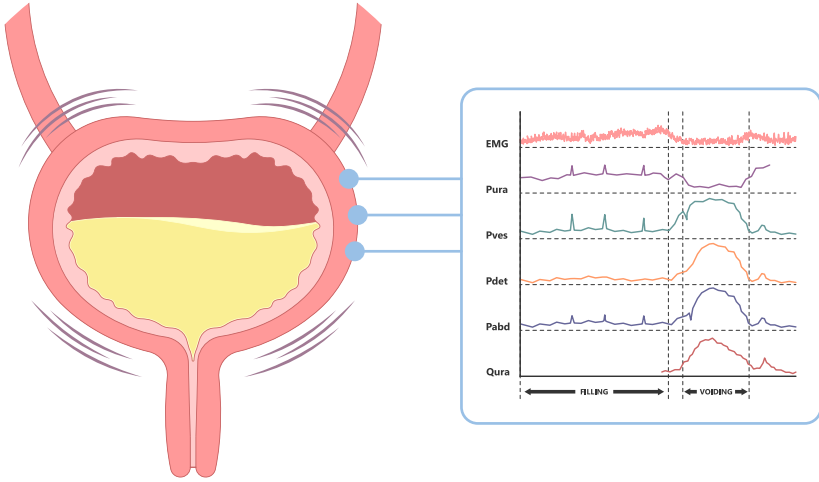
Every moment of the day, your body does countless things that you're barely aware of – you blink your eyes, you breathe, you tighten and relax muscles and so much more. The idea behind biofeedback is that, by paying close attention to some of these unnoticed actions, you can improve your ability to control them. And that's as true for your bladder as it is for many other parts of your body.

It's an idea that has been around for decades. In fact, biofeedback has been in practice for incontinence conditions since the late 1940s when Dr. Arnold Kegel – yes, the same doctor that Kegel exercises are named for – developed a process to help patients visualize the muscles that control bladder function.

Visualizing those muscles is important, because they're not always easy to identify on their own. But once you're able to identify them, you can target them directly with exercises that are designed to make them stronger.

That's important because stronger pelvic muscles often mean better bladder function. It's a matter of simple physiology. Your pelvic floor includes a number of muscles that work together to help your bladder do what it's supposed to do. But like most other muscles, they can become weaker over time, and they can be damaged from stressful events like childbirth. They're also like other muscles in that they can be strengthened by working them out – in this case, by squeezing and relaxing them. And when your pelvic floor is stronger, you have greater control of where and when you have to go.

Best of all, many people see results surprisingly quickly – in some cases, in just a couple of weeks! If it takes a little longer for you, though, don't give up – biofeedback is a technique that can take time to get right – but it can really be worth the effort.



How Does Biofeedback Work?

All muscles in the body give off a small electrical signal that can be measured through a process called electromyography (EMG). Small sensors are placed close to the muscles being monitored, and these sensors transmit those signals to a computer screen where you can see – and sometimes hear – them directly as they’re being used. You’re getting immediate feedback about what your body is doing, and you can use that information to plan a personal exercise program that increases the strength and holding power of the muscles that control urination.

Because not all patients are comfortable with the same sensor, pelvic muscle activity is typically monitored with one of two types of devices:

Vaginal/Anal Device with Sensors – These are small, tampon-like sensors that are placed either in the vagina or anus. It’s not as embarrassing as it sounds – you can usually place them yourself, and you can remain fully clothed as they transmit data.

Stick-on Sensors – These are patches like small adhesive bandages, and they’re stuck to the skin just outside of the anal opening. They’re similar to the electrodes that are used in EKGs.

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Once these are in place, another set of sensors is usually placed on the abdomen. This is important because one of the most common errors that people make when trying to exercise their pelvic floor muscles is that they use their abdominal muscles instead. With biofeedback, you can tell which is which, teaching yourself to focus on the right muscles instead of the wrong ones.



Sessions performed in a physician's office typically last about 30 minutes, and most patients average about four of them – though a few more or less isn't out of the ordinary. They're usually scheduled two or three weeks apart, and it's important to keep performing your pelvic floor exercises every day between in-office sessions to get the best results.

For those who prefer to perform biofeedback on their own, there's also a new system developed by PeriCoach (www.pericoach.com) that is made for home use. It is a vaginal device with sensor and app that is connected to your smart phone via Bluetooth. The PeriCoach app guides you through exercise sessions and provides guidance for proper performance, similar to an in-office treatment session.



PELVIC FLOOR STIMULATION

What is Pelvic Floor Stimulation?

For more than 35 years, Pelvic Floor Stimulation has been one of the most frequently used therapies for the treatment of urinary incontinence. You may also hear it referred to as electrical stimulation or E-stim, but whatever it's called, the physiology behind it is simple: You strengthen many of your muscles by regularly using them – that is, by repeatedly contracting them. That's true for the muscles in your arms, your legs and, yes, even your pelvic floor.

Of course, getting your pelvic floor muscles to contract isn't quite as simple as lifting a few weights or doing a few squats. Unlike many other muscles in the body, your pelvic muscles don't move limbs or joints, so it's easy to forget that they're even there.

That's where technology comes in. Pelvic Floor Stimulation uses an external device to get the appropriate muscles working, helping to build the strength and endurance that can aid in bladder control.

How Does Pelvic Floor Stimulation Work?

Patients who receive Pelvic Floor Stimulation generally either have it performed once or twice a week in a physician's office over a period of several weeks, or they may be initially trained in the procedure in a clinical setting and then treat themselves at home with a rented or purchased stimulator.

Either way, small amounts of electrical stimulation are delivered to the pelvic floor muscles through the use of either a sensor that's inserted into the vagina or rectum or via surface electrodes that are placed around the anus. The sensor is then attached by a cable to a small, battery-operated device or a larger clinical device that controls the procedure.

This stimulation activates the appropriate muscles, causing them to contract and relax repeatedly. The process isn't painful. Some patients describe a tightening or lifting of the pelvic floor muscles, some feel a light tapping or mild tingling sensation, and others may feel nothing at all.

GETTING STARTED

Most patients will find that biofeedback and pelvic floor stimulation are used as part of a broader treatment program that often includes lifestyle changes, behavior modification and other measures. That's because there can be many factors that contribute to incontinence, and an effective care path is one that addresses as many of these as possible.

The best way to get yourself on the road to drier days is to talk to your healthcare professional. If he or she isn't familiar with these therapies, look for a physician, physical therapist or nurse specialist who is knowledgeable about urinary incontinence.

It's surprising how many treatment options are available today for people with incontinence - but the only way to find an approach that works for you is to reach out to a healthcare professional.

*Visit the NAFC
Doctor Finder
online at NAFC.org/find-a-doctor*



WE'RE HERE TO HELP

For more information about Biofeedback, visit the National Association for Continence online at www.NAFC.org/biofeedback. To learn more about Pelvic Floor Stimulation, visit us at www.NAFC.org/pelvic-floor-stimulation. And for a detailed discussion of other continence issues, visit www.NAFC.org.

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