

Acute urinary retention

What is acute urinary retention?

Urinary retention is the inability to empty the bladder. With acute urinary retention, you can't urinate (pass water) at all, even though you have a full bladder (the organ in your body where urine is stored before it leaves the body). Acute urinary retention requires urgent treatment.

Anyone can experience urinary retention, but it is most common in men over 50 because of prostate enlargement.

What are the symptoms?

Acute urinary retention causes pain in your abdomen. You feel an urgent need to urinate but you simply can't. You often feel that the lower part of your belly is swollen.

Treatment

Treatment begins with inserting a urinary catheter (plastic tube) through the urethra (urine pipe) to drain the bladder. This relieves the immediate distress of a full bladder and prevents permanent bladder damage. Long-term treatment for any case of urinary retention depends on the cause. Your doctor will let you know what further tests or treatment are needed.

Sometimes a urinary catheter needs to stay in place for some time. If this is the case, you will need to know how to look after it at home.

What is a urinary catheter?

A urinary catheter is a small hollow tube that is inserted into the bladder. It usually goes in the same way that urine comes out. The catheter is held in place by a small internal balloon that is filled with water. Holes at the end of the tube in the bladder allow urine to flow out and be collected in a bag.

You may feel that having a urinary catheter in place is confronting and challenging. It should not limit any of your usual activities, like socialising or exercise. If you have any concerns, talk to your healthcare professional, who can offer support and advice.

Care of a urinary catheter

Personal hygiene is very important to reduce the risk of getting a urinary tract infection.

Always wash your hands before and after touching the catheter.

Wash the area where the catheter enters the body gently with soap and water daily and after you have a bowel action. If possible, have a daily shower or bath.

Men should always pull back the foreskin and clean the whole area. When cleaning is finished, remember to return the foreskin to its normal position.

When cleaning the catheter tube, always wash away from your body using gentle downward strokes.

Avoid using talcum powder or perfumed soaps – they can cause irritation.

Care of the drainage bags

The catheter is usually attached to a drainage bag. See figure below. There are two types of drainage bags:

- A small bag that attaches to your leg by elastic straps or Velcro®
- A larger bag, usually used at night

The bag should be emptied regularly. Aim to empty it when it is about two-thirds full. Overly full bags can cause irritation and increase the risk of infection.

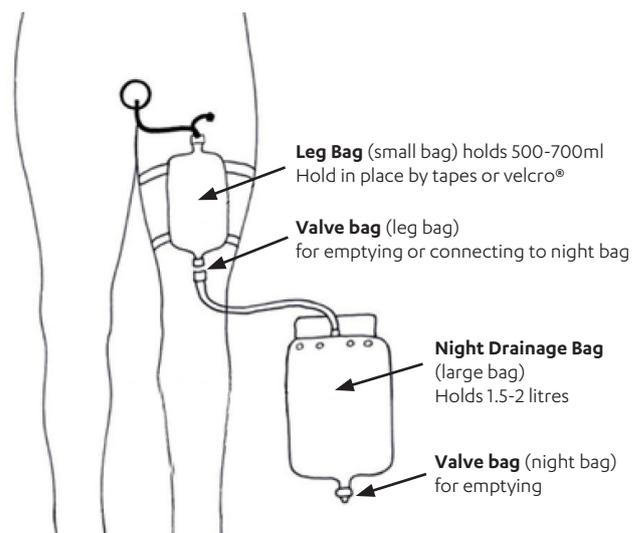
The catheter and bag should only be disconnected when the bag is being changed, usually once a week.

Ensure your catheter tubing is not bent or blocked – this will block the flow of urine.

Keep the bag below the level of the bladder to prevent urine flowing back into the bladder.

Don't allow the bag or the opening valves to touch the floor.

Below: Urinary catheter attached to a drainage bag



Emptying the drainage bag

1. Wash your hands
2. Open the tap at the end of the bag and empty the contents into the toilet or a clean container
3. Wipe the tap clean and close it securely
4. Flush the toilet or empty the container into the toilet and flush
5. If used, wash the container with household detergent and dry carefully
6. Wash your hands again

Night bags

Before going to bed

Follow these steps to connect your leg bag to a night bag:

1. Wash your hands before and after emptying your bag
2. Empty your leg bag
3. Clean the connection
4. Leave the leg bag's outlet tap open
5. Remove the cap from the overnight bag tube
6. Slide the night bag's connector into the leg bag's outlet tube
7. Attach the overnight bag to an appropriate stand or place it in a container (such as a bucket) at the side of the bed

Morning

1. Wash your hands
2. Close the outlet tap on the leg bag
3. Disconnect the night bag and empty the urine into the toilet
4. Look after the night bag as per the manufacturer's instructions. Most are multiple use. If this is the case, the usual advice is to rinse your night bag thoroughly in cold running water every morning. If it is single-use bag, simply empty it and then throw it away.
5. Wash your hands again after completing these steps

What problems may occur?

Infection and catheter blockage can occur.

Signs of infection may include feeling unwell, a high temperature, a change in the smell of the urine or cloudy urine.

Pink or rose-coloured urine can be caused by either infection or by irritation from the catheter in the bladder.

If you are experiencing signs of an infection please return to the Cabrini ED, see your local doctor or urology specialist.

Troubleshooting

No urine draining?

- Is the catheter or tubing kinked or squashed?
- Is the tubing to the bag blocked?
- Is the bag below the level of the bladder?
- Are the straps threaded correctly and not blocking the inlet valve of the leg bag?
- Try changing the position of the catheter or bag – for example, by swapping legs
- Are you drinking eight cups of fluid per day?
- Try a new bag

If these do not work and the catheter does not drain any urine for four hours or more return to Cabrini ED for assistance.

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

You need to seek medical review if:

- **You notice a high temperature**
- **You are feeling unwell**
- **You develop pain in your lower abdomen or where the catheter comes out**
- **You notice cloudy, blood-stained or offensive-smelling urine**
- **No urine has come out of the catheter for four hours**

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au