Bladder Retraining for Urge Incontinence  
A Matter of “Mind Over Bladder”

What is urge incontinence?  
Urge incontinence is often called an overactive bladder. It is urine loss that comes with “urgency,” a strong desire to urinate (void). It can occur while washing dishes, putting a key in the front door, or just by getting up from a chair or out of bed in the morning.

People who have frequent urges to urinate often have bladder spasms. These are contractions of their bladder muscle that they cannot control. We don’t know exactly why, but many people lose the ability to suppress their bladders and hold in their urine. When spasms occur, urgency or even incontinence may also occur.

What is bladder retraining?  
Bladder retraining is “teaching” your bladder to regain control of urination. It means not giving in to the urges and voiding only at scheduled times, whether you feel you have to go or not. The result is that you can gradually lengthen the time between urges to go to the bathroom.

The goal of bladder retraining is to break the cycle of frequency, urgency, and incontinence by allowing you to take control of your bladder.

How well does this work?  
The success rate of bladder retraining is very good. Most studies have reported cure rates close to 80%.

Bladder retraining has worked very well for people with bladder spasms, urinary frequency and urgency. Besides being a treatment that works well, it is virtually free of side effects!

Steps to bladder retraining
- You will first fill out a bladder diary. This is a written record of your voiding habits. It will help us see where changes in your daily routine will help us retrain your bladder.
- You will start by urinating at set intervals that you feel comfortable with. Most people can start at intervals of one hour. You and your clinician will decide what intervals work best for you.
- As an example, if you are asked to void every hour, you should empty your bladder at 7 a.m., 8 a.m., 9 a.m., and so on.
- If you feel an urge to go in between the hour intervals, try to delay urinating, even if this means having some discomfort. The idea is not to give in to your bladder. However, if you try and are not able to suppress the urge, go to the bathroom and reset your clock.
- Based on your bladder diary, your goal is to urinate every _____ hours. Once you are comfortable voiding at these times, the time between urinating is gradually increased by 5 to 30 minutes. Every _____ days, increase the voiding interval by _____ minutes.
- You will not be asked to keep this schedule during sleeping hours. Only get up when you feel an urge to urinate. If you can keep to the schedule during the day, any nighttime problem will take care of itself.
- Bladder retraining is continued until you are voiding every 2 to 5 hours, depending on your level of fluid intake.
Tips to help you delay the urges
The rule of bladder retraining is to not use the bathroom before the scheduled time, even if that means having an accident! Above all, do not panic or rush to the bathroom; this will only make the urgency worse.

The feeling of urgency is just that, a feeling. It is an early warning sign to get to a bathroom. Here are some ways that may help you delay voiding if you feel the urge before your scheduled voiding time.

• Stand still, or if possible, sit down and keep your legs together.
• Squeeze your pelvic muscles tightly (Kegel exercises) as directed by your clinician
  – Do this _____ times, holding for _____ seconds and resting for _____ seconds
  – Do a long hold for _____ seconds.
• Take three slow deep breaths and relax your abdominal muscles to avoid pressure on the bladder.
• Try to distract yourself by keeping your mind busy – for example:
  – Balance your checkbook
  – Count down from 100 by 7s
  – Make a list of chores
  – Read a book

Diet changes that may help
• Your goal is to drink _____ glasses of fluid or water each day. Spread this out evenly throughout the day.
• You’ll know that you are drinking enough fluid when your urine is light yellow and clear, not dark.
• Drinking too little fluid causes the urine to be concentrated. This may irritate the bladder wall and make your urges worse.
• Drinking too much fluid leads to frequency of urination. This makes it harder to retrain your bladder.
• You’ll need to find the amount of fluid that’s right for you. Keep talking with your clinician about this. Your daily fluid goal may need to be changed according to your progress.
• Dietary irritants can also cause an increase in urgency, frequency and incontinence. Please refer to the handout on dietary irritants for more information or speak with your health care provider.

You may have some leakage during this bladder retraining program. Don’t get discouraged. That is normal. The goal is to get control of your bladder and not give in to the urges you feel or allow your bladder to run your life.

A final note ...
After treatment, some patients may have a relapse and void more often, as before. This can be treated by repeating the bladder retraining program.

Treatment of urge incontinence (overactive bladder) often involves more than one therapy. Please talk to your health care provider about other treatment options.