

What to Know About Your Bladder and Voiding

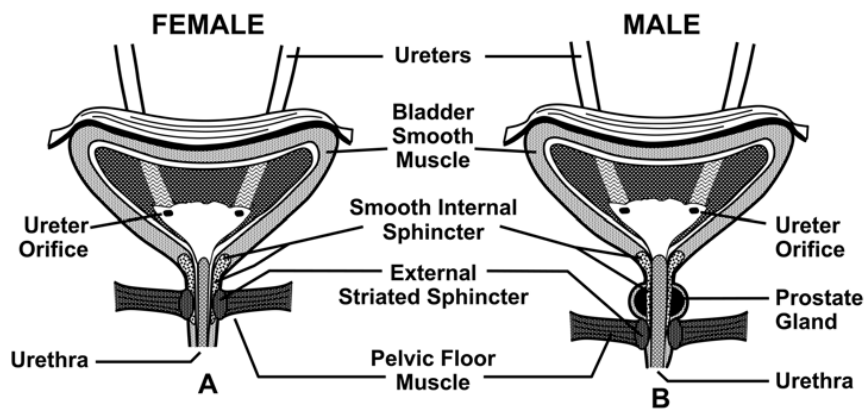
Urination (voiding) is controlled by your *lower urinary tract*, which includes the bladder and urethra and the muscles near them. This is often called the “pelvic area.” The picture below shows this area.

The Parts of the Lower Urinary Tract

The bladder is a hollow sac of muscle and tissue that stores urine produced by the kidneys. The bladder changes shape when there is more or less in it. When empty, it resembles a deflated balloon or is flat as a pancake. As it fills with urine, its shape looks like a football. The urethra is a small, slender tube that starts at the bottom of the bladder and goes to the outside of the body. In women, the urethra is about 1 1/2 inches long. In men, the urethra is around 8 inches long.

Muscles Around the Lower Urinary Tract

The sphincter muscle is like a “valve” that surrounds the urethra, keeping it closed until you want to void. The pelvic floor muscles are a group of muscles that go from the front (anterior) to the back (posterior) of the pelvis around the rectum, forming a sling that supports the pelvic organs. In women this sling of muscles surrounds the urethra and the vagina.



The Voiding Cycle

The voiding (sometimes referred to as urinating) cycle has two phases—the bladder-filling phase and emptying or voiding phase. Normally, the bladder muscle is relaxed while the bladder fills with urine. When the bladder is full, a signal is sent to the brain that creates an urge to void. This is different from “urgency” (a sudden strong desire to urinate that is hard—or impossible—to delay). When a person feels that voiding is appropriate (the right place and time), he or she relaxes the urethral sphincter, the bladder muscle contracts, and the flow of urine begins.

