HEALTH BASICS

External incontinence devices

External incontinence devices collect urine outside the body without entering the bladder.

WHAT IT IS
A body-worn system that collects urine outside the body

WHERE IT COMES UP
Urine leakage, limited mobility, hospital care, and toileting support

WHY IT MATTERS
Collects urine while avoiding a tube inside the bladder

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Continence nurse, primary care clinician, or urology service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Skin, fit, urine flow, and sometimes bladder ultrasound

Overview

External incontinence devices collect urine without placing a tube inside the bladder. They are also called external urinary collection devices. They are not a disease, diagnosis, or treatment for the cause of urinary incontinence.

These devices may help someone who cannot reach a toilet reliably because of mobility problems, illness, disability, or recovery from surgery. They are also used in hospitals and care settings when staff need to monitor urine output.

The two main types are:

Some adhesive pouches collect urine around the genitals without suction. Products described as external fecal devices collect stool, but these are different from urinary devices and require separate assessment.

External devices are not the same as absorbent pads. Pads hold urine after leakage, while collection devices direct it into a bag or container. They are also different from an indwelling urinary catheter, which passes through the urethra-the tube that carries urine out of the body-and remains inside the bladder.

- Penis sheaths or condom catheters , which fit over the penis and drain through tubing into a bag
- Female external urine collection devices , which rest against the external genital area and usually draw urine into a container using gentle suction

How it works

A penis sheath is usually made from soft synthetic material. It rolls over the penis and stays in place with adhesive or another securing system. Its end connects to drainage tubing and a urine bag.

Correct sizing matters. A sheath that is too loose may leak or come off. One that is too tight may restrict blood flow or damage the skin. The tubing also needs to remain open rather than twisted or trapped.

A female external device usually has a soft, absorbent surface placed between the external folds of skin around the vaginal opening. A pump draws urine away using low suction. These devices are generally intended for someone who is lying down or sitting in a supported position. Placement, movement, and stool contamination can affect how well they work.

A collection device does not empty the bladder by itself. The bladder and urinary muscles must still release urine normally. For this reason, an external device is not a solution for urinary retention , which means being unable to empty the bladder properly.

Each product has its own instructions for placement, suction, changing, cleaning, and disposal. Improvised adhesives, tubing, or suction settings can cause injury or prevent the device from working.

Why it matters for your health

An external device can reduce contact between urine and the skin. This may help with comfort, clothing changes, sleep, and daily care. It may also make urine output easier to measure.

Keeping the skin drier may reduce the chance of incontinence-associated dermatitis . This is red, sore, or broken skin caused by repeated exposure to urine or stool. A device does not remove this risk completely. Leaks, pressure, adhesive, sweat, and infrequent skin care can still cause damage.

External devices avoid placing a catheter through the urethra into the bladder. This can be useful when urine collection is needed but an indwelling catheter is not. The CDC advises

considering an external catheter instead of an indwelling catheter for selected cooperative male patients who do not have urinary retention or blockage at the bladder outlet.

External devices can still become contaminated with bacteria. They do not guarantee protection from a urinary tract infection, or UTI. Evidence is also more established for penis sheaths than for newer female external devices.

The device may improve day-to-day management, but it does not explain why leakage is happening. New or worsening incontinence may still need assessment for causes such as medication effects, constipation, infection, prostate problems, pelvic floor problems, or difficulty emptying the bladder.

What can go wrong

Leakage or poor drainage may happen if the device is the wrong size, shifts out of place, or has blocked tubing. Body position, movement, anatomy, and stool contamination can also affect collection.

Skin damage can include moisture-related soreness, pressure injury, blisters, or open areas. Adhesives and cleaning products may cause contact dermatitis, an irritated or allergic skin reaction.

A penis sheath that is too tight can cause swelling or a constriction injury. Reduced blood flow may cause increasing pain, numbness, cool skin, or a change in skin colour.

Female external devices can cause pressure or friction around the vulva, inner thighs, or buttocks. Suction above the product's specified setting may increase the risk of injury.

Urinary retention may be missed because an external device can collect only the urine that leaves the body. Little or no urine in the container could mean a leak, low fluid intake, a blocked tube, reduced urine production, or difficulty emptying the bladder. A bladder ultrasound, often called a bladder scan, can check how much urine remains inside.

A urinary tract infection can occur with or without a collection device. Possible signs include burning when passing urine, frequent or urgent urination, lower abdominal discomfort, fever, or blood in the urine. Cloudy or strong-smelling urine alone does not confirm an infection.

Tubing and collection bags can also create a trip or pulling hazard, particularly when getting out of bed or using a wheelchair.

What you can do

Ask what the device is meant to achieve. The answer might be protecting skin, supporting sleep, measuring urine, or avoiding an indwelling catheter. This helps determine whether the device is meeting the intended goal.

Practical steps include:

Arrange routine follow-up if the device repeatedly leaks, falls off, causes mild redness, interrupts sleep, or does not suit your movement and daily activities. A different size or collection method may work better.

Seek prompt medical advice if you develop an open skin area, worsening genital swelling, fever with urinary symptoms, visible blood in the urine, or very little urine with lower abdominal fullness.

Seek emergency help for severe genital pain, marked swelling or discolouration, inability to pass urine with severe lower abdominal pain, or serious illness with confusion, breathing difficulty, or fainting.

- Confirming the correct device and size with a continence service or clinician
- Following the manufacturer's placement, changing, cleaning, and suction instructions
- Keeping a record of leaks, urine output, skin changes, and device changes
- Asking about a bladder scan if poor bladder emptying is a concern
- Checking whether creams, powders, or cleansers are compatible with the adhesive
- Replacing single-use parts rather than washing and reusing them

Common questions

Does an external device treat incontinence?

No. It collects urine after it leaves the body. It does not strengthen the bladder, improve pelvic floor control, remove a blockage, or treat the underlying reason for leakage.

Is it safer than an indwelling catheter?

It avoids placing a tube inside the bladder, which removes some catheter-related risks. However, it can still cause leakage, skin injury, contamination, or infection. The safest option depends on why urine collection is needed and whether the bladder empties normally.

Can it be used at home?

Some external devices are designed for home use. You may need help with sizing, placement, obtaining supplies, or arranging a suction unit. A continence nurse, primary care service, pharmacist, or urology service can explain locally available options.

Can it be worn while walking?

Some penis sheaths can connect to a leg bag for mobility. Many suction-based female devices are intended mainly for bed or supported chair use. Check the specific product instructions rather than assuming it is safe for walking.

Does strong-smelling urine mean an infection?

Not by itself. Urine smell can change with hydration, food, medicines, or how long urine has been in the bag. Infection is assessed using symptoms and, when appropriate, a urine test.

What if no urine reaches the container?

Check for a visible leak, displaced device, kinked tubing, or a full bag. If you feel unable to urinate, have lower abdominal fullness, or continue producing little or no urine, seek medical advice promptly. There is no reliable home check that can rule out urinary retention.

Sources

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