

# Leaky bladder? It may be the caffeine

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During the recent series of heavy rainstorms, some Southern California homes developed a leaky roof. However, rain or shine, some women suffer from a leaky bladder. The culprit may be the coffee or tea that they consume. A new study found that women who consume large amounts of caffeinated beverages may have an increased risk of urinary incontinence. Researchers at Harvard Medical School in Boston found that of more than 65,000 U.S. women, those with the highest caffeine intake (four or more cups of coffee or 10 cans of cola) were more likely than those that consumed less caffeine to develop urinary incontinence over four years. Those with the highest intake were 19% more likely to develop frequent problems with bladder control (at least once a week). Interestingly, the study found no increased risk among women consuming 299 mg of caffeine (the equivalent of about three cups of coffee) or less per day. Caffeine was significantly related to urge incontinence in the group that consumed 450 mg or more per day (the highest caffeinated group). Dr. Mary K. Townsend, one of the researchers, noted that women with incontinence are often told to limit their caffeine intake; however, their study suggested that avoiding higher caffeine intake might also be appropriate advice for women who do not have urinary incontinence, but are concerned about developing it.

The study findings are based on data from two large long-term studies of 65,000 U.S. nurses between the ages of 37 and 79. Half consumed less than 150 mg of caffeine per day, which was comparable to less than one cup of coffee per day. These women had no increased risk of incontinence. According to the Dr. Townsend, caffeine is a diuretic; thus, people who already have an overactive bladder may be more susceptible to those effects. She added that even low doses of caffeine can speed muscle contractions in the bladder.

The take home message is that if you have or wish to avoid a leaky bladder, consume caffeine in moderation. Of course, other factors may be involved, such as pelvic floor damage from pregnancy or obesity. For many women, bladder control can be improved with Kegel exercises. See attached slide show.