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Consequences of holding your pee? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I was wondering if people can die from not going pee. How long can a person go without peeing and, if they cross that line, then what will happen? Also, can you get a blood infection from ignoring a bladder infection?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Put your fears to rest about dying from not using the toilet — it is extremely unlikely! However, holding your urine past the point of that "got to go" feeling may not be the best idea. Every person can ignore her or his body's signals to use the restroom for different amounts of time, but all of us have the same basic urinating instincts that will eventually prevail.

As we consume foods and liquids our bladders begin to fill up, holding anywhere from 50 to 500 milliliters of urine before we feel the urge to relieve ourselves. The bladder wall has receptors that measure how much the bladder is being stretched to accommodate incoming waste. When our bladders are about half full, these receptors send a signal to the brain telling us it's time to visit the bathroom. In normal situations, the brain then signals the bladder to hold on tight until the right time, place, and toilet presents itself. Most adults have control over bathroom urges, and can act on or delay urges as needed.

In other words, while bladder function is an automatic process, it is our brains that choose when to visit the bathroom. How long a person can ignore the need to pee depends of the size of a person's bladder and their will. Consciously holding in your urine will eventually cause the body to override the brain's attempts to delay urination, and in all likelihood, the person will simply wet their pants. Research has not shown that holding your pee will cause rupture of the bladder or bladder infections — just incontinence.

A bladder infection, or cystitis, is an inflammation or infection of the bladder, and is not likely to result from holding urine too long. Similar to urinary tract infections (UTIs), bladder infections occur when bacteria make their way into the bladder via the urethra, the tube that urine travels through to exit the body. Women are more likely to get bladder infections because they have

shorter urethras than men. Sexual activity is a common cause of UTIs and bladder infections for women and men. Although bladder infections and UTIs aren't caused by holding your pee, they may make you to feel like you have to pee all the time — one of the most common symptoms of these infections is feeling the urge to urinate very frequently.

While the treatment for bladder infections is a fairly simple antibiotic routine, untreated bladder infections may lead to more severe outcomes, including kidney damage or bacterial bloodstream infection (bacteremia). Bacteria in the bloodstream can be dangerous because it has a strong association with sepsis, which can be deadly. However, when a bladder infection is treated promptly, these more serious infections are not likely. If you feel you may have a bladder infection, make an appointment with a health care provider.

So, when you've got to go, try and make your way to the toilet before you become uncomfortable. But if you have to hold it, you can sit tight knowing your inconvenience is unlikely to lead to an infection.

Alice!

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