What are lower urinary tract symptoms (LUTS)?

LUTS describes symptoms related to problems of the lower urinary tract (bladder, prostate and urethra). LUTS are broadly grouped into voiding (obstructive) symptoms or storage (irritative) symptoms. A man may have mainly voiding symptoms, mainly storage symptoms, or a combination of both.

How common are LUTS?

LUTS become more common in men as they get older. However, LUTS can also occur in young men, although the cause of the symptoms may be different. A large Australian study has shown that about one in 14 (7%) men in their 40s, and nearly one in three (29%) men over the age of 70, report moderate to severe LUTS. A smaller Australian study of men 35 to 80 years old found that storage symptoms were twice as common as voiding symptoms (28% versus 13%).

What causes LUTS?

LUTS, especially if it is painful to urinate, may be caused by an acute problem such as a urinary tract infection, or infection and inflammation of the prostate gland (prostatitis).

Storage symptoms may be due to an overactive bladder (OAB). OAB is when there is a feeling of urgency to urinate, usually with frequency and nocturia can happen with or without urge incontinence (see Table). This type of LUTS may indicate an underlying chronic medical condition such as obesity, diabetes (high glucose levels in the blood), high blood pressure or obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA), or may be due to the effects of smoking. Drinking fluids late at night, too much alcohol or caffeine (tea, coffee, cola drinks), or low levels of physical activity can make storage symptoms worse.

Voiding symptoms are usually due to a blockage at the outlet of base of the bladder, making it more difficult to pass urine. The blockage may be caused by an enlarged prostate gland or scarring of the urethra (the tube that carries the urine). Enlargement of the prostate gland can lead to both storage and voiding symptoms and is a common cause of symptoms in men.

Other causes of LUTS include some medicines, and neurological diseases such as stroke and Parkinson’s disease. LUTS is also linked with...
depression and erectile dysfunction.

It is common for there to be several factors acting at the same time to cause LUTS and the exact cause is not always easy to find.

**Can LUTS be prevented?**

A man is less likely to get LUTS if he has a healthy lifestyle and body weight, does not smoke and gets treatment for any medical conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure or sleep apnoea. For a man with LUTS, reducing caffeine and alcohol (these substances can irritate the bladder), avoiding large amounts of fluid before bed, preventing constipation (straining to pass stools can affect pelvic floor muscles, which are important for both bowel and bladder control), and losing weight may help to improve the symptoms.

**When should I see a doctor for LUTS?**

LUTS is not just a normal part of ageing so it is a good idea to see your GP if you notice any changes to urination, particularly if the symptoms are affecting your quality of life or interfering with normal daily activities.

Many people think that urinary symptoms in men are a sign of prostate cancer or some other disorder of the prostate. This is not true. Prostate cancer may sometimes be present with urinary symptoms but most often symptoms are not related to prostate cancer, and the LUTS have other causes.

Men can have big prostates but no LUTS, or small prostates and LUTS. So, while a large prostate may be a contributing factor, the presence of LUTS requires a very thorough general check of both physical and psychological health.

If needed, the doctor may refer you to a urologist, who specialise in diseases of the urinary tract and genital organs.

**How is the presence and cause of LUTS diagnosed?**

The nature of the symptoms being experienced will confirm the presence of LUTS. Further evaluation by a doctor is needed to determine the cause.

The assessment of LUTS starts with a thorough medical history and examination. A medical history includes the type of symptoms, the presence of other health conditions, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA), depression, erectile dysfunction, and a review of any medications. Examination includes height, weight, waist circumference, blood pressure and a general examination.

The tests used to determine the likely cause, depend on the man’s age and details given in the medical history.

Other tests include one or more of:

- Urinalysis: urine tests to check for signs of infection or cancer in the urinary tract or kidneys
How are LUTS treated?

When deciding on the best treatment, the doctor takes account of the type of LUTS, the cause of the LUTS, and other factors such as the degree of bother caused by the LUTS and lifestyle factors.

Lifestyle changes (avoiding caffeine and alcohol in the evening, increasing physical activity and reducing refined carbohydrate intake) or managing other health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension or OSA may be the first option. If symptoms are not very bothersome, the best approach may be to monitor the LUTS through regular checks with the doctor.

If the LUTS are bothersome, oral medicines (tablets) can help. The medicine suggested by the doctor will depend on the type and cause of LUTS. In some cases several medicines may be tried to see if they improve symptoms.

Surgery is only done in severe cases of prostate enlargement or other serious causes of obstruction. Surgery is the most effective treatment for relieving symptoms caused by an enlarged prostate but it has potential side-effects.

Visit healthymale.org.au or speak to your doctor for more info.