

# Rick's Story: Reclaiming Control from Overactive Bladder

**At its worst, an overactive bladder (OAB) can send your quality of life into a tailspin. Luckily, when stigma is overcome and proper treatment is received, the results can be incredible.**

By D.F. McCourt

As a licensed counselling therapist specializing in grief, loss, and spiritual health, Rick Benson, a 62-year-old New Brunswick resident, understands the power of discussing difficult topics. And now he's opening up about his experience with OAB. "I've spent my whole adult life hiding this," says Rick. "To speak about this is a major step for me. When I was initially asked to speak publicly about this, I hesitated. But after some serious reflection, I thought, 'I'm going to share my experience because it's important to break the silence, so that others don't suffer through this the way I have.'"

## **A common ailment with wide-ranging consequences**

Rick is far from alone. Up to one in five Canadians over the age of 60, men and women alike, suffer from OAB. Symptoms include urinary urgency, frequency, incontinence, and nocturia (waking up during the night to urinate). OAB grows more common with age but can affect people at all stages of life. Rick himself has been living with it for decades.

Untreated, OAB can be insidiously disruptive. In fact, self-reported social issues and functional declines are more common among OAB patients than among patients with diabetes. "OAB-related urgency and incontinence can cause a significant and meaningful decrease in quality of life," says Dr. Adrian Wagg of the University of Alberta. "OAB can lead to isolation. It can lead to a reduction in social activity as well as a reduction in physical activity and exercise. It's associated with poor mood, depression, and anxiety."

## **Many Canadians are living undiagnosed and untreated**

It was on a recent trip to Europe, when his constant need to find a washroom was causing frustration, that one of Rick's friends suggested seeking treatment. "There was no joking or teasing, just an honest man-to-man discussion about a health issue," Rick says. "All too often, we men don't talk openly about health



Rick Benson photographed outside his home in Quispamsis, NB.

issues. After that trip, I thought, 'Enough is enough, I need to be more honest and direct with my doctor about this.'"

Shortly thereafter, Rick was referred to a urology clinic and finally received an OAB diagnosis. "As soon as I had a name for it, the way I thought about it changed," Rick says. "I had always thought of it as a personal weakness. Once I knew that it was a medical condition, I had an immediate sense of control and the encouragement to address it."

There are a wide range of interventions available. "The first line of solutions is behavioural," says Dr. Wagg. "Patients need to be aware of the types and

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volumes of fluids they're drinking. They should become more aware of their toilet habits, keeping a diary if necessary. It can also help to do pelvic floor exercises, Kegels basically. If these behavioural interventions fail, and they're somewhat less likely to be successful in later life, there are medications available, including oral therapies."

## **Diverse treatments working in harmony**

According to Dr. Wagg, it's common for patients like Rick to find optimal success through a combination of medical and behavioural approaches. When a patient finds the treatment regimen that's right for them, the results can be life-altering. "When someone's OAB is well-managed, their physical activity

levels tend to rise and they become more confident and socially active," says Dr. Wagg.

Now, with his OAB managed through a combination of oral medication, physiotherapy, meditation, and pelvic floor exercises, Rick is noticing little ways his life has improved every day. "Recently, I caught myself sitting at the front table of a conference, and I was fine all the way through the hour-and-a-half presentation," he says. "That would have never happened before. I used to always sit in the back so that no one would notice when I inevitably had to get up to use the washroom."

## **Urinary issues are not a normal part of aging**

Perhaps the most important message for anyone suffering from bladder issues is that these issues aren't normal, they're not inevitable, and they're very treatable. "Bladder issues aren't a normal part of getting older," says Dr. Wagg. "And they shouldn't be tolerated as such."

As more people like Rick make the decision to not only advocate for themselves but to speak out on their issues so as to benefit others, there's real promise that more Canadians living with undiagnosed and untreated OAB will be empowered to achieve the quality of life they deserve. "I'm really hopeful, because we're starting to talk about issues like this more openly," Rick says. "In areas of health such as bladder health, if we step outside of the stigma and silence to have a conversation, we can help people."

