

Caring for someone with incontinence



This fact sheet provides carers with general information about managing the incontinence of the person they are caring for, and where to seek further information and advice.

Many carers find incontinence to be one of the most difficult aspects of the caring role. Incontinence can be unpredictable, add dramatically to a workload and be very costly. Many carers report feeling angry, frustrated, lonely, and not coping well. The impact on young carers can extend to education, employment opportunities and family relationships.

It's not always easy to care for a person with incontinence, but the right advice and support from a health professional can make it easier for you both.

What is incontinence?

Incontinence is a loss of bladder or bowel control that results in unwanted leakage of urine or faeces. There are a number of different types of incontinence. Management strategies will differ depending on the type and cause of incontinence, and will consider the living arrangements and lifestyle of both the caregiver and the person being cared for.

Who is at risk?

Incontinence is a common issue that affects one in four Australian men and women.

While incontinence affects people for different reasons, older people and people with a disability are at a greater risk of developing bladder or bowel control problems. Poor mobility, memory problems and chronic health problems such as Parkinson's disease, stroke, dementia and multiple sclerosis greatly affects bladder and bowel control.

Where to seek help

There may be a number of things that are causing the incontinence or making it worse, so getting professional help is important to help manage it. If the person you are caring for is incontinent, phone the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66. It is a free and confidential service and is staffed by continence nurse advisors who can provide practical information, a wide range of resources and details of local continence services.

Continence assessment

A continence assessment can help identify the type of incontinence the person you are caring for has. After the continence assessment, a treatment and management program can be worked out for the person. This will help everyone involved – socially, emotionally and financially.

A continence assessment will collect information about the person's bladder and bowel functions, including:

- how often they go to the toilet;
- how much urine is passed;
- how often and how much leakage is occurring;
- how regularly bowel motions are passed;
- fluid and diet intake;
- current medications;
- other health problems; and
- ability to perform self-care tasks such as toileting, dressing and getting to and from the toilet.

A rectal or vaginal examination may also be required as part of the assessment.

What you can do

Some lifestyle changes can help to better manage incontinence, depending on the type of incontinence the person has, their living arrangements and care situation. A continence nurse advisor will take this into account and help set out a plan, which could include:

- adequate fluid intake (1.5–2 litres daily);
- a healthy, fibre-rich diet to prevent constipation;
- pelvic floor muscle exercises;
- a bladder retraining program;
- toileting program;
- medications (both prescriptions and over-the-counter medications such as laxatives);
- continence products (pads and pants, bed protection, condom drainage or catheters);
- equipment (bathroom or toilet grab rails, commode or portable urinal); or
- an assessment of toilet accessibility and visibility (especially at night).

Financial assistance

The National Continence Helpline (1800 33 00 66) can advise about funding schemes for continence products that are provided by the Australian, state and territory governments.

Incontinence is often linked with other chronic health conditions or disabilities. As a carer for someone who may have one of these health conditions or disabilities, you may be eligible for financial assistance from the government. To find out more and assess your eligibility, contact the Carer Advisory Service on 1800 242 636.

Some practical tips

- If a bladder control problem comes on suddenly, see a doctor as this may be due to another health issue, such as a urinary tract infection.
- If the person suddenly cannot pass urine, it is important you contact the doctor immediately.
- If the person is constipated, see a doctor about different treatment options, as constipation can also affect bladder control.
- Consult a doctor if diarrhoea persists for more than 24 hours. The cause of the diarrhoea could be food poisoning or medicines taken for other health conditions, including antibiotics.
- Change continence pads as soon as they are wet or soiled.
- Wash the area with warm water and soap-free cleanser or soap alternative after each urine or faeces leakage. Pat the skin dry carefully and never rub the skin. If the skin becomes red and sore, seek help from a continence nurse advisor or the doctor.
- Barrier creams can be used to protect skin from perspiration, urine or faeces, but check with your pharmacist about whether the cream chosen will affect the absorbency of the pad.
- Wear disposable gloves (available from supermarkets or chemists) when in contact with urine or bowel motions. Wash your hands carefully afterwards, even if you wear gloves.
- Make sure the person is drinking enough fluids throughout the day. Water is the best choice, however soups, custards, milk on cereal and jellies can also be counted as fluid. Do not reduce daily fluid intake in an attempt to reduce leakage. Concentrated urine is more irritating to the bladder, making it overactive and more prone to infection.
- Some types of drinks can irritate the bladder. Alcohol and drinks containing caffeine (such as coffee, tea, chocolate drinks and cola) can make the bladder overactive (hold less urine, create a sense of urgency, or need to go to the toilet often). Certain foods may also irritate the bladder or bowel, so see a doctor or continence nurse advisor if you think this is a concern.
- If the person passes urine several times during the night (nocturia), it may help if they increase their fluid intake in the earlier part of the day and reduce their intake in the evenings.



For more information >>

- Visit a doctor or phone the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66 for details of a local continence service.
- Phone the National Continence Helpline (1800 33 00 66) and speak with a continence nurse advisor. This free service is managed by the Continence Foundation of Australia on behalf of the Australian Government.
- Go to the Continence Foundation of Australia website: continence.org.au/carers
- Go to the Australian Government website for Continence Aids Payment Scheme information: bladderbowel.gov.au
- Phone Carer Advisory Service on 1800 242 636 for advice and support relating to caring.
- Go to the Carers Australia website for links to state and territory Carers associations: carersaustralia.com.au
- Information for young carers: youngcarers.net.au
- Contact the local Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centre on 1800 052 222.
- For more detailed information, *Caring for someone with bladder or bowel problems* is available free from the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66. This easy-to-read booklet will provide you with practical tips about caring for a person with incontinence.

Continence Foundation of Australia

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The Continence Foundation is the Australian peak body for awareness, education and advocacy for those with incontinence and their carers.

Note: The information in this fact sheet is based on general health guidelines for incontinence. If you are concerned about any aspect of your health or lifestyle, speak to your doctor.

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