

Incontinence

The Health Column

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Incontinence describes any accidental or involuntary loss of urine from the bladder (urinary incontinence) or bowel motion, faeces or wind from the bowel (faecal or bowel incontinence). It may cause distress as well as being a hygiene problem. However, incontinence can be managed and treated.

If you have experienced this problem you aren't alone. Incontinence is a widespread condition. It can range from 'just a small leak' to complete loss of bladder or bowel control. In fact, over 4.8 million Australians have bladder or bowel control problems for a variety of reasons.

It is likely that the true number of people affected is much higher. Many people do not tell their doctor or pharmacist about their incontinence, due to embarrassment. Some people mistakenly think that incontinence is a normal part of ageing or that it cannot be treated. If you experience bladder or bowel control problems seek help, as the symptoms will not go away on their own and may worsen over time.

This week is World Incontinence Week, June 22–28. It is aimed at encouraging people who experience incontinence, or those caring for someone with incontinence, to seek help by phoning the National Continence Helpline (1800 33 00 66).

Urinary incontinence is common and often associated with pregnancy, childbirth, menopause or some chronic health conditions. It can range from a small dribble when you cough or laugh, to large flows of urine. Stress and urge incontinence are common types of urinary incontinence.

People with poor bowel control or faecal incontinence have difficulty controlling their bowels. This may mean you pass faeces or stools at the wrong time or in the wrong place. You may also find you pass wind when you don't mean to or experience staining of your underwear. About one-in-20 people experience poor bowel control. It is more common as you get older, but a lot of young people also have poor bowel control. Many people with poor bowel control also have poor bladder control (wetting themselves).

Treatment depends on the type of incontinence. However, there are lots of things you can do. Lifestyle changes may significantly help some types of incontinence and these include:

- Drink about 6–8 cups of fluid each day (1.5–2 litres) spread evenly throughout the day.



- Reduce the number of drinks containing caffeine (e.g. tea, coffee, hot chocolate and cola) as they can worsen urge incontinence.
- Avoid constipation by maintaining a healthy balanced diet that contains plenty of fruit, vegetables and fibre.
- Lose some weight as a modest amount of weight loss can improve urinary incontinence.
- Aim for 30 minutes of exercise most days.
- Do pelvic floor exercises to improve stress incontinence to strengthen the pelvic floor muscle.
- Go to the toilet only when you need to, rather than 'just in case'.
- Go to the doctor if you think you have a urinary tract infection.

Your local pharmacy can help too. Pharmacists can give you practical advice on how to manage incontinence as well as supply incontinence pants, pads and other aids. Visit your local pharmacy during World Incontinence Week and find out how they can help.

You can get more information about incontinence from the Self Care Fact Cards *Bladder and urine control*, *Pelvic floor exercises*, *Fibre and bowel health*, and *Urinary tract infections* available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location, phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.