



Continence care

For people living with MS

While bladder and bowel movements are not typical topics of daily conversation, they are a fact of life. Up to 90 per cent of people with MS will experience some difficulties with bladder or bowel control. With the right information and support, these symptoms can be managed effectively in order to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle.

How can MS affect my bladder and bowel function?

In people with MS, demyelination of the nerves responsible for bladder and bowel control can affect the speed at which nerve impulses travel from the brain to the bladder and bowel and back again. As a result, a range of bladder and/or bowel symptoms can occur. The severity and longevity of these symptoms can vary greatly from person to person.

There are broadly three types of bladder dysfunction that can occur in people with MS:

- failure to empty;
- failure to store; and
- a combination of the two – combined dysfunction.

Symptoms of bladder dysfunction can include increased or decreased frequency, urgency, incontinence, urinary tract infections and nocturia (the need to urinate one or more times during the night).

The good news is, disruptive bladder symptoms can be successfully managed, and bladder complications and associated illnesses can be prevented.

Bowel issues are less common in people with MS. Severe constipation is one of the main causes of bowel problems but other symptoms can include spasticity of the colon or the anal sphincter, loss of the gastro-colic reflex, and loss of sensation in the anus and rectum. As with bladder problems, bowel issues can also be managed effectively.

You are not alone

Unlike other MS symptoms, issues with incontinence can continue after a relapse subsides. While this can be distressing, there are products, aids and techniques to help you manage these symptoms.

While it is common for people with MS to feel angry, frustrated, isolated and embarrassed about these symptoms, you are not alone. There are many other people with MS who experience similar symptoms and can relate to how you are feeling. There are also many other medical conditions which can affect a person's bladder and bowel control. In fact, there are an estimated four million Australians affected by incontinence.²

Talking about how you feel can be liberating. Trying to cope alone will only cause more stress and anxiety which is no good for MS. If you don't feel like talking to family and friends, consider making contact with an MS Australia – ACT/NSW/VIC Peer Support Volunteer. You can ask to be matched with someone who is in similar circumstances and will understand how you are feeling.

Call MS Connect to find out more.

What should I do if I experience continence issues?

If you are experiencing bladder or bowel concerns, you should first talk to your GP. A GP can help determine whether any incontinence may be a result of MS or another condition. They can suggest ways of managing these symptoms, using a combination of medication, aids and diet and lifestyle adjustments. Speaking to your neurologist about new and/or persistent symptoms is also important.

Your GP may refer you to an urologist for serious bladder concerns or a gastroenterologist for bowel concerns. MS nurses will also become

a great point of contact for you as you manage incontinence (and other symptoms) on an ongoing basis.

MS Australia – ACT/NSW/VIC has MS nurses based in regional and metropolitan areas. In addition, the National Continence Foundation of Australia has trained continence advisers in each state and territory to help those in need of support. An appointment can be made with a continence adviser without a doctor's referral, but it is helpful if a doctor is aware of the visit.

How can I manage these symptoms?

Treatments

In addition to your usual MS-related treatment, there are a number of medications specifically used to keep bladder frequency and urgency under control. However, it's important that these are only prescribed by a doctor or continence adviser after a thorough assessment of your symptoms.

Treatments are also available to help manage constipation but it is best to seek advice from a health professional before purchasing any medication.

Continence Aids

A number of organisations provide a broad range of continence aids to help those with bladder and bowel concerns to live a sociable and fulfilling lifestyle. A community nurse or continence adviser can explain the various products available and what may help improve your individual circumstances.

Easy access at home

Often, just a few changes can make a big difference to bladder and bowel control issues. An important thing to remember is that it will be easier for you to be continent if the toilet is easy to find and access. Refer to the contacts listed below for advice on how to make your home more accommodating.

Getting out and about

Peace of mind about toilet facilities and their locations will make all the difference and could also help determine where you go and how you get there. Consider calling ahead to your destination – restaurant, hairdresser, shops – to ensure there are adequate facilities. Once you arrive, ask where they are so you know where to go if it is urgent.

The Australian Government, through the National Continence Management Strategy, has developed the National Public Toilet Map. The map shows the location of 14,000 public toilet facilities across Australia. The website, www.toiletmap.gov.au, provides a trip planner and the capacity to plan toilet breaks for short and long journeys. Access to the toilet map is available from compatible mobile phones, and a new Toilet Map application can be downloaded for iPhones.

People with a disability who meet certain eligibility criteria can also purchase their own universal key from their local member of the Master Locksmiths Association to access some public toilets.

Maintain a healthy diet

Often people with bladder problems try to drink less for fear of urinating too frequently. This can

make matters worse and result in constipation. In addition, urine becomes concentrated and irritates the bladder, causing more frequent urinating. It's important to drink 1.5–2 litres of fluid every day (preferably water), even if you have bladder problems. Try consuming your recommended fluid intake in three or four intervals throughout the day, rather than sipping small amounts continuously. This allows you to maintain fluid intake without increasing frequency. Also, try not to drink too much fluid for up to two hours before going to bed or before a social outing.

A healthy bowel pattern also depends on a well-balanced diet. Most people need a healthy, high-fibre diet. High-fibre foods include oats, fruits (fresh, stewed or dried), vegetables, wholegrain or wholemeal including oatmeal, rice, wheat and barley, cereals and breads, nuts and lentils.

Get moving

Regular exercise is important for everyone, especially for people with MS. Even for those with limited mobility, exercise improves blood

flow throughout the body, including the gut, helping to prevent constipation. Regular exercise will also help you to maintain an ideal body weight.

Pelvic floor muscles, especially, support the bowel and bladder to function properly. Excess body weight applies pressure to this area.

Quit smoking

Smoking usually increases how frequently a person coughs and, in turn, increases the risk of incontinence. Smoking can also cause many other health problems, and has even been linked with the development and progression of MS.

What about sex?

Most bladder and bowel issues can be managed effectively so that you and your partner can still enjoy being intimate. It's important to speak openly with your partner about any concerns you may have. Your MS nurse or continence adviser will be able to help with advice that relates to your individual circumstances.

Is there any financial assistance available for people with continence concerns?

Some financial assistance is available through the Australian government's Continence Aids Payment Scheme (CAPS). This can assist eligible families living with MS to meet some of the costs of continence products.

A doctor or continence adviser must fill in the forms needed to apply. Visit the government's official bladder and bowel website (www.bladderbowel.gov.au) to download the CAPS guidelines and application form.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) provides a range of continence products to

eligible members of the veteran community via the Rehabilitation Appliances Program (RAP). A doctor or the DVA can provide further information. Call the DVA on 133 254.

Other financial assistance is available in certain states and territories through government-funded schemes. This varies widely in each state and can depend on the type of condition and the type of continence products used. Your local community nurse or continence adviser can assist with applications to different state-funded schemes.

Directory of assistance

- **Your GP** should be the first port of call for any new and/or persistent bladder or bowel concerns. MS nurses and continence advisers can also help you to manage these symptoms on an ongoing basis.
- **Contact MS Connect** to access the services of MS Australia – ACT/NSW/VIC, including access to MS nurses, peer support, and additional information resources. 'Continence Care in MS' information sessions and teleconferences are held across the ACT, NSW and Victoria by trained health professionals. Call 1800 042 138 for more information about any of these services.
- **National Continence Foundation of Australia:** Visit www.continence.org.au for more information on managing bladder and bowel problems. The website includes a section for family members and carers.
- **National Continence Helpline.** Call 1800 330 066 for advice, support and to make an appointment with a continence adviser.
- **www.bladderbowel.gov.au:** The Australian government website dedicated to bladder and bowel health.
- **National Public Toilet Map:** Visit www.toiletmap.gov.au or phone 1800 990 646. The map shows the location of more than 14,000 public toilet facilities, including details about accessibility for people with disabilities.
- **Master Locksmiths Association:** Visit www.masterlocksmiths.com.au or call 1800 810 698 for a universal key to public toilets.
- **Independent Living Centres:** Visit www.ilcaustralia.org or call 1300 885 886 (or (02) 6205 1900 in the ACT) to view a comprehensive range of products to assist with day-to-day living.

References:

1. Khan F *et al.* Multiple sclerosis: prevalence and factors impacting bladder and bowel function in an Australian community cohort. *Disabil Rehabil* 2009;31(19):1567-76.
2. National Continence Foundation of Australia [cited online 13 August 2010]. Available from www.continence.org.au

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