Is your personal waste management system in need of an overhaul? Good inputs = good outputs when it comes to bladder and bowel health!
Letter from the Editor

Our media seems constipated with information about diets, weight and exercise, plus celebrities doing strange things with all three. Perhaps we’ve reached the point where we no longer take in the really important messages around these health topics? It all becomes ‘wallpaper’ – or we think the information only applies to other people.

This edition of Bridge takes a different spin on the aspects of health which are so basic that we tend to ignore or misunderstand them. This time, we’re approaching healthy weight and exercise from the standpoint of incontinence.

We’re showing how good bladder and bowel function can be a starting point for overhauling your entire health ‘engine’!

Visit our new online forum – www.continence.org.au

People can now talk openly yet anonymously about their bladder and bowel control issues, including the experience of caring for a loved one with incontinence. Share your story with others. You’re not alone and support is available, so why not get connected!

View from the Bridge

Our last two editions dealt with a healthcare issue which remains largely unaddressed or ignored: pelvic floor health. Our highly successful Pelvic Floor First campaign has some key messages around protecting and strengthening the pelvic floor muscles, especially for women.

Good bladder and bowel control relies largely on strong and responsive pelvic floor muscles: being overweight or obese puts a downwards physical strain on these continence-related muscles, reducing our control. Leaking with exercise is a good example of weak pelvic floor muscles letting go under pressure.

If the aim of the Continence Foundation is to make Australia ‘a drier place’, then addressing the Australian community’s weight issues as one of the highest risk factors for incontinence is clearly a way to go for the Foundation. This edition of Bridge addresses the awareness and education needed for bladder and bowel health, starting with an understanding of the body’s processes around food, fluids and exercise.

A whopping 60% of Australians over 25 years of age are overweight or obese. Children’s obesity levels are a rising epidemic. Incontinence ranks alongside heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes, sleep apnoea, osteoarthritis and psychological problems as major weight-related health problems. While breast cancer is understandably a key issue for women’s health, heart disease actually kills four times as many women as breast cancer – and its primary risk factor is being overweight and under-exercised.

The so-called lifestyle diseases continue to shorten our lives and ruin our quality of life. Too often we’re setting poor examples for our children (in the media or in our own homes) that persist into adulthood when we should be helping them form healthy lifestyle attitudes and habits for life.

Clearly, we’re still not taking diet and exercise messages to heart.

The information in Bridge is built around general health guidelines and sensible approaches to diet and exercise tips that could help improve bladder and bowel function. This cannot replace the expert and individual advice of a doctor, continence nurse or continence physiotherapist. Because guidelines cannot apply equally to everyone, if you are concerned about changes to your health or symptoms or have existing health challenges, speak to your doctor sooner rather than later. Don’t overlook or underestimate the effects of changing your diet, exercise levels or medicines. Never alter medicines or dosages without consulting your doctor.
Are you overweight?

You might have heard about checking your Body Mass Index (BMI). This is an international standard for weight classification for adults. You can divide your weight in kilograms by the square of your height in metres, but it’s much easier to visit www.health.gov.au and find the BMI calculator. For adults (people aged 18+), a BMI of 25 and more is overweight and a 30 or more BMI is obese. However BMI doesn’t take into account your fat distribution: BMI doesn’t tell you what’s fat mass and what’s lean mass. Measures of waist circumference (or waist-to-hip ratio) have been found to be better predictors of future health. Go to Waist Measurements on the website www.measureup.gov.au for more information.

Why is your waist measurement or BMI important?

While these measures might look bad, you might be feeling quite okay. You might think you look good in a swimsuit, but your waist measurement and BMI may not be looking so great. Or you might think it doesn’t matter how you look! But it certainly matters to your body: it reacts to consistent bad treatment in ways you don’t want or need. For men, a waist measurement over 94cm and for women, over 80cm means health risks which get higher with increasing waist measurement. Whichever way you look at it, there are much higher rates of death and illness for people who exceed their recommended weight or waist measurement. It’s a simple fact that if you are overweight your health and lifestyle are under threat.

What does it mean for your health if you are overweight?

Some common health problems are caused or made worse by being overweight. Incontinence, for a variety of reasons, ‘flows beneath’ many health conditions largely weight-related, including:

- Cardiovascular disease (risk of heart attack, heart failure, sudden death, stroke and cardiac rhythm problems)
- High blood pressure
- Type 2 diabetes (non-insulin dependent)
- Sleep apnoea (i.e. pauses in breathing, sometimes waking with a jolt or a snort)
- Osteoarthritis
- Anxiety or depression
- Reproductive problems for women
- Poor bladder or bowel control, such as a ‘weak’ or overactive bladder, toilet urgency or frequency (which may also involve leakage), nocturia (going to the toilet often overnight), and
- Some medicines taken for health conditions may have incontinence as a side-effect (discuss this possibility with your doctor).

The good news …

Losing weight – as little as 5kg – can improve or cure incontinence, as well as reducing your risk of developing these health problems. For women (who have the highest prevalence of incontinence) an improvement in continence control through weight loss has been shown to happen at any life-stage – no matter how overweight you are.

Talk about it! Our medical system’s focus is on treating and managing the symptoms of a primary condition (such as diabetes or a heart problem). Because incontinence often underlies other health issues – and it’s a sensitive and personal issue – it can stay hidden, untreated and poorly managed. Incontinence deserves expert attention. Find out more, and who to talk to, on the back page.
Does being overweight affect bladder and bowel function?

Many health conditions are a result of being overweight or obese. Weight gain is a result of eating too much fatty, sweet or high-calorie foods, coupled with too little exercise. Many of today’s common health conditions are called ‘lifestyle diseases’ as they’re caused by our poor choices of (more) food and (less) activity over time.

If you’re overweight, you’re in a high-risk group for poor bladder or bowel control. Incontinence is in the background of many weight-related health problems:

- **Extra body weight** presses down on (and weakens) the pelvic floor muscles (PFMs) which are involved with good bladder and bowel control.
- **Nerve damage** is associated with conditions such as with diabetes or a stroke and brain-to-bladder/bowel messaging systems can be damaged or interrupted.
- **Medicines** taken for health conditions can cause incontinence as a side-effect.
- **Bowel function**, including leakage (soiling) and passing uncontrolled wind are problems linked to being overweight and/or incontinent. Being ‘regular’ means passing a bowel motion anything from 1–3 times a day to 3 times a week (once a day is fairly normal). Bowel irregularity can be caused or worsened by eating too much and choosing the wrong foods (high-fat, high-sugar and/or low-fibre). Low exercise levels also contribute to poor bowel function – and to weight gain.
- **Nocturia** (waking frequently for overnight toilet visits) is a symptom of many other health problems. It leads to fatigue and lack of motivation and productivity the next day. Snacking and over-eating and less energy to exercise can be a result. Frequent urination with nocturia can train the bladder to have a smaller capacity.
- **Lifestyle** is often affected by both incontinence and by being overweight. Relationships, social and exercise activities, physical capacities, energy levels, work productivity, emotional health and self-esteem can lead to a downward health spiral – and the motivation to eat well and to exercise can suffer.

Health conditions linked to bladder or bowel problems

- Digestive conditions such as Crohn’s, coeliac disease, colitis or diverticulitis, chronic diarrhoea or constipation.
- Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs) and cystitis can be associated with toilet urgency and frequency and possibly leakage.
- Laxative over-use can create bowel problems. But a carefully tailored plan for their use is necessary in some cases (following a stroke or bowel surgery, or with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) or dementia, for example).
- After abdominal surgery (such as a prostatectomy) incontinence may be an issue.
- Nerve-related conditions like Multiple Sclerosis (MS), Parkinson’s, spinal injury or brain trauma may result in incontinence.

Want to find out more about pelvic floor safe exercises?

Visit [www.pelvicfloorfirst.com.au](http://www.pelvicfloorfirst.com.au) or call 1800 33 00 66

- Advice about making your fitness program pelvic floor safe
- A detailed list of pelvic floor safe exercises
- Tips on how to modify exercises if you need to
- Free brochures about pelvic floor muscle (PFM) exercises
- Details of your local continence professionals
Exercise

The term ‘exercise’ covers three types of physical activity: strengthening exercises (resistance), aerobic (cardiovascular) exercise and flexibility exercises (stretching, range-of-motion). All three help to keep your body operating efficiently. If you’re losing weight with a view to improving your bladder and bowel control, exercise will be an essential part of your weight loss program.

Why? Regular, moderate physical activity helps decrease fatigue, strengthens muscles and bones, increases flexibility, stamina and balance, helps with good bladder and bowel function, improves your sense of well-being and stability, reducing your risk of falls or injury. Joint flexibility is important too, especially for people with mobility concerns: difficulty moving or with coordination (where removal of clothing or reaching a toilet in time) can cause leakage. This is called Functional Incontinence and it can also increase the risk of falls.

Set some goals and commit to exercising daily, gradually extending these as your strength and fitness improve.

Check [www.pelvicfloorfirst.com.au](http://www.pelvicfloorfirst.com.au) or phone 1800 33 00 66 for free leaflets about exercising safely, including exercises for the pelvic floor.

Food

Being overweight puts you at risk for many health conditions that can shorten your life and affect your quality of life – including a higher risk of developing incontinence.

A good diet is one where you choose healthier foods more often than foods that are less healthy. Plenty of fibre in your diet can be thought of as little brooms that sweep through your bowel and keep things moving along. If you improve the intake of fibre in your diet (such as more fruit, vegetables, wholegrain breads and cereals) be sure to increase your fluid intake to match – otherwise you’ll cause or worsen constipation which can, in turn, also worsen your bladder control.

Eating well may not be that simple: you may have to change some life-long habits and attitudes. It’s wise to get professional help to learn how much food is enough, how much is too much, and the difference between feeling hunger, feeling satisfied and feeling full. If you’re having trouble losing weight on your own, get some professional help. Like incontinence, weight management deserves expert advice and support.

The Dietitians Association of Australia website [www.daa.asn.au](http://www.daa.asn.au) has tips for nutrition, healthy eating and a list of accredited Dietitians.

Fluids

What is the recommended daily fluid intake? Keeping the body hydrated (operating with enough water content) is essential for overall good health – including good bladder function. Be aware that you need more fluid in hotter weather and with increased exercise levels. Encourage children to drink plenty of water and be aware of their daily intake. Ideally, replace soft-drinks and fruit juices with water, or dilute fruit juice with a little water.

Not used to drinking enough fluids? It can be difficult to change your habits, but these tips might help. Don’t wait to feel thirsty before you have a drink. As a check and a prompt, keep a daily fluids record for a while. Keep a jug of water handy on your desk or kitchen bench. Take tablets with a glass of water rather than just a sip.

Cutting back on fluids to try and cut down on urine leakage? The result may be the reverse! Concentrating the urine in this way can irritate the bladder lining and make it more unstable. If you’re going to the toilet too often, or planning your day around the nearest toilets, find out about bladder training techniques by phoning the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66.
Tips for bladder and bowel health

1. Overweight? Be sure to lose weight wisely, over time
2. Commit to exercising every day
3. Monitor your daily fluid intake – are you drinking enough water?
4. Avoid drink types known to be bladder irritants (e.g. coffee and alcohol)
5. Plan ahead for meals, snacks and exercise
6. Change your diet gradually by improving fibre intake, reducing portion sizes and by removing unhealthy temptations from the fridge and pantry
7. Change your shopping habits: spend most of your shopping time and money at a fresh food market instead of the supermarket
8. Include pelvic floor muscle exercises (PFMs) in your daily routine
9. Keep a record of food, fluids, exercise in a daily journal
10. If you have bladder or bowel leakage and/or you haven’t been able to lose weight on your own, talk to the appropriate health professional – a continence nurse, dietitian, weight-loss counsellor or your doctor.

More advice

- You can lose weight and improve your bladder and bowel control with some at-home tactics and expert help. But improvements don’t happen overnight. Don’t be tempted by fad diets or unrealistic claims or expectations – you’re in this for the long haul!
- Aim to walk every day for 30–60 minutes for overall health improvement. Exercise according to your ability (e.g. if confined to a wheelchair, ask your physiotherapist about seated exercising). Build-up slowly.
- If necessary, improve your daily fluid intake with more water (the best choice of fluid). Increase your fluids if you increase dietary fibre. Soups and custards, for example, are also considered to be ‘fluids’.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine-containing drinks (tea, coffee, sports drinks, chocolate and soft drinks). Swap to water or good alternatives like herbal teas. Be aware that fruits and vegetables also contain water.
- Purge your pantry and refrigerator of temptations. You can’t be tempted by what’s not there! Plan your shopping list around what you plan to eat – and don’t shop when you’re hungry. In the evening, plan and (as much as practical) prepare your meals and snacks for the next day.
- You’ll easily cut down serving sizes by using side plates instead of dinner plates and choosing smaller bowls.
- It’s never too early and it’s never too late to start – but don’t attempt everything immediately, trying to change all aspects of diet, lifestyle and exercise routine at once. Approach your health overhaul with a plan in mind and improve and refine.
- Reduce the proportion of your shopping in the supermarket and shop more in fresh food markets. Expand your vegetable and fruit choices with healthier, inventive preparations. Shift to healthier food: fresh, simple and unprocessed.
- PFM exercises (sometimes called Kegels) must be done correctly every day to work – and, yes, they DO work! Talk to a continence physiotherapist, visit www.pelvicfloorfirst.com.au or call a continence nurse advisor on 1800 33 00 66.
- Keep a diary or journal to write down your meals and snacks, exercise and fluids. Record your aims each week, your feelings and the weight or centimetres lost. You could also print out bladder diary sheets from www.continence.org.au to record your fluid intake, output and leakage volume and episodes.
- Working alone can be hard and is sometimes impossible. Consider attending a support group or getting professional help. See the list of contacts on the back page.
The BrightSky Card™ makes CAPS easy. Deposit your CAPS payment on your BrightSky Card and get:

$50 EXTRA value plus FREE delivery* and for every additional CAPS equivalent amount you deposit, you get the same benefits! Its a great way to SAVE with BrightSky Australia.

Contact us about the BrightSky Card™
- 1300 88 66 01
- 1300 88 66 02
- orders@brightsky.com.au
- www.brightsky.com.au

Better health, brighter life

* Terms and Conditions apply: visit www.brightsky.com.au or call 1 300 88 66 01. BrightSky Australia is the healthcare product division of a leading Australian disability NGO, ParaQuad NSW.
Need help for a bladder or bowel control problem?

You could talk to ...

- **Your GP** will know your health history and can advise you on good exercise choices and levels of activity suitable for you.

- **The National Continence Helpline** (1800 33 00 66) is a free and confidential service. It is ideal if you are too nervous to talk to your GP. The Helpline nurse advisors can send you free leaflets on a wide range of bladder and bowel related topics and provide details of your local continence clinic.

- **Continence Nurse Advisors** have specialist training in incontinence (the National Continence Helpline staff are continence nurses).

- **Continence Physiotherapists** have completed a postgraduate course in pelvic floor rehabilitation. In many cases, doing pelvic floor exercises correctly can improve stress urinary incontinence in women.

- **Dietitians** specialise in foods and nutrition and can help with diet and fluid intake advice to improve digestive function, bladder and bowel control and weight.

- **Pharmacists** can advise on reducing your weight (being overweight is a high-risk factor for incontinence) and can advise on medicines taken for other health conditions which might be linked to incontinence.

- **Continence clinics** are usually self-referring (i.e. you won’t need a GP’s referral before making an appointment). However, it can be helpful if you’ve spoken to your doctor first to ensure you can take along to the continence clinic appointment your health history, plus current problems and any medicines you take for these.

- **Continence Physiotherapists** can help with bladder leakage related to stress urinary incontinence (not emotional, but physical stress) and the best forms of exercise for you. The Helpline can put you in touch with them.

A bladder or bowel leakage problem won’t go away on its own. In fact, it will probably get worse without expert attention. Even if you consider it ‘just a small problem’, incontinence can be treated, better managed and often cured – at any stage of life. It’s worth a call to a continence nurse advisor on the National Continence Helpline (1800 33 00 66). It’s a free and confidential service.

Would you like copies of *Bridge* for your community health centre, support group, fitness centre, exercise class, a sporting group or library? Bridge is free! Order copies by phoning the National Continence Helpline (1800 33 00 66) or via www.continence.org.au

More information online:

- Continence Foundation of Australia: www.continence.org.au
- www.pelvicfloorfirst.com.au

- www.healthsite.gov.au
- www.measureup.gov.au
- www.swapit.gov.au

- Dietitians Association of Australia: www.daa.asn.au
- The Heart Foundation: www.heartfoundation.org.au
- Bowel Cancer Australia: www.bowelcanceraustralia.org

National Public Toilet Map: www.toiletmap.gov.au

The National Public Toilet Map shows the location of more than 14,000 public and private public toilet facilities across Australia. Funded by the Australian Government’s National Continence Program, this online map helps you plan your journeys and toilet stops.

The National Public Toilet Map is available on any mobile phone with an Internet browser. Go to m.toiletmap.gov.au on your phone to be automatically directed to the mobile site.

The National Public Toilet Map is also available for Apple’s iPhone. Just go to the App Store on your iPhone or use iTunes to download the National Public Toilet Map App. It’s free.