

# Where to get help for incontinence



A number of health professionals specialise in the area of incontinence. It may be confusing to work out who to see to treat the problem. This fact sheet outlines how to approach the first appointment with a doctor, the range of services available and the role of various health professionals.

## Who to approach and what to ask

A doctor is a good starting point if you or the person you are caring for experience bladder or bowel control problems. When making an appointment with the doctor, ask for a long consultation to allow time to explain the problem without feeling rushed. Consultations with a continence nurse advisor or continence physiotherapist are normally longer to allow time to assess and diagnose the problem.

To prepare for an appointment with the doctor, write down all the information possible to describe the problem. For example, record:

- how often you (or the person you are caring for) 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.

This will help to assess the problem. You may also wish to ask the doctor questions such as:

- what is causing the incontinence?
- could medications be causing it or making it worse?
- is an examination needed?
- how can it be fixed or better managed?
- will tests be required?
- will surgery be required (usually considered as a last option)?
- will medications fix it?
- are there any other options in treating this problem?
- what complications might arise from this treatment?
- should someone who specialises in this problem be seen?
- what help is available to buy the right product (if recommended)?
- can free product samples be obtained to determine if it is the right product?
- are there any funding schemes to assist with the cost of continence products?

## Continence services

### National Continence Helpline

The National Continence Helpline is a free, confidential telephone information service staffed by continence nurse advisors who provide information and advice to anyone affected by or caring for someone with a bladder or bowel problem. The Helpline offers:

- information regarding a wide range of bladder and bowel control problems;
- free continence information resources such as brochures and fact sheets;
- information and advice about continence products;
- information about national and state/territory funding schemes that may assist with the costs of continence products such as pads and catheters; and
- contact details for local continence services.

The National Continence Helpline (1800 33 00 66) operates from 8am–8pm (AEST) Monday to Friday.

### Continence clinics

A continence clinic is staffed by a continence nurse advisor, continence physiotherapist and medical specialists such as geriatricians, gynaecologists, urologists or urogynaecologists. A medical referral is often required but some clinics accept self-referrals.

### Community health centres

The local community health centre may have a nurse or a physiotherapist with expertise in continence management, or a community health nurse who can make referrals to a more appropriate health professional. Enquiries should be made at the local community health centre.

### Interpreter service

People from non-English speaking backgrounds can access an assessment and advice with the help of an interpreter. An interpreter can be requested when contacting a health professional.

The Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS) can arrange an interpreter when calling the National Continence Helpline. Phone 13 14 50 and ask to be connected to the National Continence Helpline (1800 33 00 66).

## Continence health professionals

The right health professional can discuss the problems as well as provide an assessment and a personal treatment program.

The National Continence Helpline (1800 33 00 66) can provide information about local continence clinics and the name of the nearest continence nurse advisor or continence physiotherapist.

### Doctor (general practitioner)

Doctors provide medical assessment and treatment options, review and prescribe medications, order clinical tests, and can refer patients to a medical specialist, continence nurse advisor or continence physiotherapist if required.

The doctor should talk about incontinence and possibly conduct a physical examination. Some treatments are carried out by the doctor; others need referral to a specialist.

It is important to involve the doctor in the overall care. They know about the health history and current medications. Ask for advice on available treatments, and discuss all medications and their possible effects on the incontinence. Also discuss management of other conditions, such as asthma, diabetes, obesity and arthritis to reduce their impact on the incontinence.

### Continence nurse advisor

A continence nurse advisor is a registered nurse with extensive training in continence care. They assess the symptoms and provide advice on management, and in some cases, treatment.

### Continence physiotherapist

Continence physiotherapists assess pelvic floor function and tailor an exercise program to meet specific needs. They specialise in pelvic floor exercises and can prescribe other treatment options such as biofeedback and discuss relevant lifestyle factors.

### Pharmacists

Pharmacists can offer advice on medications that may cause or aggravate incontinence. Many pharmacies sell continence products such as pads.

### Medical specialists

Your doctor may refer you to a medical specialist who specialises in the treatment of bladder and bowel problems, including a:

- Urologist – a specialist who treats men and women with kidney, bladder and urinary problems. Urologists also care for men's sexual and reproductive health.
- Gynaecologist – a specialist in preventing and treating illnesses of the female reproductive organs.
- Urogynaecologist – a gynaecologist who has undertaken

specialist training to deal with the complexities of vaginal prolapse and types of bladder dysfunction, including urinary incontinence.

- Geriatrician – a specialist in providing medical care for elderly people. Rather than focus solely on disease detection and cure, they also deal with the social and rehabilitative aspects of an elderly person's health.
- Paediatrician – a doctor who provides specialist medical care to infants, children and adolescents.
- Bowel specialist – a doctor may refer people with faecal incontinence to a specialist in bowel conditions, such as a colorectal surgeon or gastroenterologist.

## 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 for information about bowel and bladder function, products and a range of resources on many continence-related topics. 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](http://continence.org.au)
- Go to the Australian Government website for Continence Aids Payment Scheme information: [bladderbowel.gov.au](http://bladderbowel.gov.au)
- Phone the 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](http://carersaustralia.com.au)
- Information for young carers: [youngcarers.net.au](http://youngcarers.net.au)

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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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