

Bladder and Bowel Changes in MS

Many people with multiple sclerosis (MS) experience bladder or bowel issues, with incontinence being the most common. The severity and duration vary, but with the right support and strategies, these symptoms can be managed to help maintain health, independence, and an active lifestyle.

How MS can affect bladder and bowel function

Bladder and bowel dysfunction (including incontinence) can occur, if demyelination of the nerves (which control the bladder and bowel) affects the speed at which nerve impulses travel from the brain, to the bladder and bowel, and back again.

Continence refers to the ability to control bladder and bowel function, including holding in urine or stool until it is appropriate to release.

Incontinence is an accidental or involuntary loss of urine from the bladder (urinary incontinence) or bowel motion, feces or wind from the bowel (fecal or bowel incontinence).

Bladder dysfunction symptoms include greater or less frequency of micturition (passing of urine), urgency, incontinence, urinary tract infections and nocturia (the need to urinate frequently overnight).

Bowel issues can include severe constipation, faecal incontinence and diarrhoea often due to:

- spasticity of the bowel or the anal sphincter;
- loss of gastro-colic reflex (mass movement of colon content, often preceded by similar movement in the small intestine, which usually occurs when food enters the stomach) and;
- loss of sensation in the anus and rectum.

With the right advice, you can manage these symptoms and prevent complications or associated illnesses.

Getting support to manage symptoms

Addressing bowel or bladder challenges early is an important step in improving your health and wellbeing and lessening or resolving symptoms.

A continence nurse can help you understand your symptoms and help you develop strategies for managing bowel or bladder issues.

A continence nurse can help you:

- understand what changes you should be looking out for and when to seek help,
- identify the symptoms you're experiencing and the impact they are having,
- provide education, lifestyle and wellbeing advice to support better bladder and bowel function,
- discuss available treatment options and liaise with your health team, and
- recommend strategies, products or equipment to manage symptoms

Bladder and bowel control problems impact one in four Australians - you're not alone!

If your neuro condition is affecting your bladder and bowel, we can help.

This is a **free service** delivered in partnership with Coloplast.

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What else can I do to manage these symptoms?

Treatments- Medications can help with bladder urgency, frequency, and constipation. Always seek professional advice before starting new options.

Continence aids - These can help you manage symptoms with confidence in daily life. Options include pads and protective underwear, urinal bottles and catheters. A continence nurse can help you choose the best products for your needs.

Plan ahead - Use the National Toilet Map or call ahead to check accessible facilities.

Carry the essentials - Keep a small bag with spare clothes, wipes, and supplies.

Maintain a healthy diet - Drink 1.5–2 litres of water daily, avoid excess fluids before bed or outings, and eat a high-fibre diet. A dietitian can provide tailored advice.

Quit smoking - Smoking irritates the bladder and chronic coughing can increase stress incontinence. Speak with your GP for support to quit.

Get moving - Regular exercise improves blood flow, helps prevent constipation, and supports a healthy weight, reducing pressure on the bladder and bowel.

Sex and intimacy - Bladder and bowel issues don't mean intimacy has to stop. Talk openly with your partner, or seek advice from your MS nurse or continence adviser.

Further support and information

- **Plus Connect**
Call 1800 042 138 or email connect@msplus.org.au for further support and information, or to make a free appointment to speak with an MS Nurse Advisor
- **The Continence Foundation of Australia**
www.continence.org.au
Has trained advisers and while you don't need a referral, it's helpful if your doctor is aware of the visit.
- **National Continence Helpline**
1800 33 00 66
- **The National Public Toilet map**
www.toiletmap.gov.au
Details more than 16,000 toilet facility locations and has a trip planner with the facility to plan toilet breaks for short and long journeys. You can access the map via compatible mobile phones and the National Public Toilet Map iPhone app.
- **The National Continence Aids Payment Scheme (CAPS)** provides financial assistance for eligible people living with MS, to meet some of the cost of continence products. Visit www.bladderbowel.gov.au for guidelines and applications forms (to be completed by your doctor or continence adviser).

