

Factsheet 23 February 2010

Help with continence

About this factsheet

This factsheet briefly outlines the different types of incontinence. It also explains how to access NHS services that can help cure or manage incontinence and where to go for further information.

The information given in this factsheet is applicable to England. Different rules may apply in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Readers in these nations should contact their respective national Age Concern organisation for information specific to where they live – see section 8 for details.

For details on how to order other Age Concern Factsheets and information materials go to section 8.

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1 Why you should seek help

Incontinence – that is loss of bladder or bowel control – has many causes. It can affect men and women but bladder incontinence is more common in women. It can present practical, emotional and personal hygiene difficulties and cause skin irritation and soreness if not managed effectively.

Incontinence can be a difficult thing to talk about but in most cases, especially if diagnosed early, there will be an effective treatment that can effectively manage or cure your particular problem. This is true no matter how old you are. As it can significantly affect the quality of your day-to-day life and your confidence when leaving your home, you should raise it promptly with your GP or local NHS continence advisory service. See section 3.

2 Different ways incontinence may affect you

The types of incontinence and some of the more common causes and treatments are explained below.

2.1 Incontinence of the bladder

Stress urinary incontinence

This is the most common type of incontinence and happens when laughing, sneezing or exercise brings on slight leakage of urine. It is caused by weakness or damage to the pelvic floor muscles that surround the base of the bladder, not the muscles in the bladder itself. Long-term constipation, some operations on the bladder or pelvic organs, or a prostate operation, can lead to this condition.

There are special exercises you can do to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles. You can learn how to do them by talking to a specialist continence adviser or from publications produced by organisations listed in section 7.

Urge incontinence

Urge incontinence is experienced as a sudden 'urge' to pass urine that cannot be ignored. Normally as your bladder fills, your brain gives you plenty of warning so that you can reach the toilet in time. In some people, muscles in the bladder contract more often than normal and with little warning, causing leakage before you have time to reach the toilet. It may be accompanied by the urge to pass urine frequently – maybe every half an hour – which is known as 'frequency'.

Urge incontinence may be due to a urine infection. In such cases it will respond to a course of antibiotics. If it is not due to an infection, the actual cause may not be found and you may be diagnosed as having an 'over-active bladder' and offered 'bladder retraining'. Here the aim is to teach you techniques that allow you to ignore the urge to pass urine and help you return to the normal pattern of passing urine of no more than six to eight times a day. Help from a health professional is usually needed to learn the techniques. If this does not lead to an improvement, there are other treatments your GP can suggest.

Nocturia

Nocturia means being woken up more than a couple of times at night to pass urine. If your sleep is regularly and frequently disturbed in this way, you may feel constantly tired during the day and so it affects not only your sleep but daytime activities too.

Nocturia is more common if you are over 60 for several reasons associated with getting older but it is important to see your doctor or practice nurse to discuss it, decide what the cause might be in your case and how best to manage it. It can be useful to keep a diary for three days before your appointment, making a note of when and what you drink each day and how often you need to get up at night.

Limiting the amount of fluid you drink in the evening can help but you should make sure you keep your fluid intake up by drinking plenty earlier in the day.

If you need to go to the toilet at night, ensure the route is well lit or keep a torch by the bed. Check there are no hazards such as shoes on the floor or furniture to negotiate that may cause you to trip or fall. If it is quite a long way to the toilet, it may be helpful to consider having a commode in your bedroom. You are more likely to trip when rushing to the toilet.

Leaking

Even if this only happens occasionally, it can still be a worry and the cause needs to be identified. Leakage of urine may be due to chronic constipation, as a full bowel can press on the bladder. If you suffer from constipation, making changes to your diet and taking regular exercise may help. Leakage can occur in men due to changes in the prostate gland.

Functional incontinence

Functional incontinence is due to practical difficulties such as:

- inability to remove cloths easily or
- inability to reach the toilet in time if you have walking difficulties and it is a distance away or if you have to negotiate unnecessary obstructions such as awkwardly placed furniture.

If physical barriers are preventing you from reaching the toilet in time, see what changes you can make. It may be helpful to have a commode in your bedroom to use at night.

2.2 Incontinence of the bowel

Loss of bowel control is also known as faecal incontinence. It is not a condition in itself but usually a symptom of an underlying condition such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or a neurological condition such as Parkinson's disease, dementia or multiple sclerosis. It can also arise following an operation in the bowel area. You should speak to your GP who can initiate tests to diagnose your problem and suggest ways to treat and manage it.

3 Help available from the NHS

You should seek advice about any type of incontinence as early as possible by discussing it with your GP or, if you prefer, with your local NHS continence advisory service.

Note: You can self-refer to your local NHS continence advisory service; you don't need a GP referral. You can get contact details for your local NHS service from the Bladder and Bowel Foundation or your Primary Care Trust's Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PCT PALS). See section 7.

Your GP or specialist nurse at the continence advisory service will want to establish the cause of your problem. As a result, a plan to treat or manage your condition should be discussed and agreed with you, along with a date to review your progress. Your GP may decide to refer you to the local continence service for specialist advice.

The treatment offered will depend on the type of incontinence you have and the severity of your symptoms.

The plan might include:

- ensuring your diet includes plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain cereals
- drinking appropriate amounts and types of fluid. It is important to drink enough fluid – around six glasses each day but you may be advised to limit drinks in the evening and limit drinks that can irritate your bladder such as tea, coffee, fizzy drinks and alcohol
- taking regular light exercise
- modifying your existing medication
- prescribing additional medication
- learning pelvic floor exercises
- introducing a bladder or bowel training programme
- providing pads or other continence products
- improving access to toilet facilities or providing aids such as raised toilet seats
- choosing clothing that is easy to remove
- providing a commode.

If this plan is not successful, you may be referred to a hospital consultant for further investigation.

Note: You can find out more about the types of treatment available by contacting the Bladder and Bowel Foundation or looking on the NHS Choices website. See section 7.

3.1 Incontinence products from the NHS

If it is agreed that pads or other products are necessary to manage your condition, they should be available from the NHS. What is available varies from region to region: each Primary Care Trust (PCT) has its own eligibility criteria and contract to supply continence products including pads. If you meet the eligibility criteria, you should be told which ones you will need and given details of how to receive regular supplies.

Incontinence pads are available to purchase in pharmacies and supermarkets but it is important to seek advice as described above before using them.

Note: you can contact your PCT PALS to find out about your PCT's eligibility criteria. NHS Direct can give you their contact details. See section 7.

3.2 Regular reviews

If you are eligible to receive long-term continence supplies you should be re-assessed at least annually. This allows your needs to be reviewed and enables any new or more suitable products to be considered.

4 Buying or borrowing products or equipment

A wide range of products is available for sale. Your continence adviser or specialist nurse may discuss these with you or you can find out about suitable products by contacting one of the organisations mentioned in section 7.

If you live in your own home, you are entitled to buy many incontinence products without paying VAT. This applies to products bought over the internet or by mail order as long as they are supplied to you as an individual. There is an exemption to this rule – VAT is charged on bed and furniture protection items.

Customs and Excise has automatically zero-rated certain continence products (for example continence pads) in order to improve accessibility. For some products you will need to complete a VAT exemption certificate in order to receive products at their retail price less VAT. You should be advised of any VAT rules when making your purchase. VAT relief does not apply on postage and packing charges.

You may wish to borrow equipment such as a commode or raised toilet seat if you are going to be staying away from home. Your local British Red Cross, local Age Concern, district nursing service or social services department may operate a loans service. See Age Concern Factsheet 42 *Disability equipment and how to get it* for more information.

4.1 Disabled Living Centres

You can get advice and information on special clothing and equipment by contacting your local centre for independent living. You can make an appointment with a specialist member of staff and may be able to see samples of some of the equipment and adapted clothing available. Staff can help you identify local or national suppliers of a wide range of products. Contact Assist UK to see if there is a centre near you. See section 7.

PromoCon is part of the Disabled Living Centre in Manchester and has a permanent display of around 3000 continence products. See section 7.

5 Help in care homes

If you are about to move into a care home and have continence needs they should be considered by a health professional with specialist knowledge of continence issues as part of your overall needs assessment. Your care plan should explain how your needs should be met. The effectiveness of your treatment and management programme should be monitored and modifications made as appropriate.

If the assessment indicates you need specialist continence supplies or products and you meet local eligibility criteria, you should not be asked to pay for them. This applies whether you are to be a self-funding resident or supported by social services.

If continence problems develop after you move into a care home, a specialist assessment may be needed and your care plan revised accordingly. Again, if you meet eligibility criteria you should not be charged for continence pads or other products.

If you have a relative who is about to move into a care home and who manages their own continence or only needs a little help, ask about toilet facilities. Check how close they are to communal areas, their accessibility, spaciousness and the availability of aids such as grab rails. Also ask how residents are supported to manage their own continence needs. Staff in a care home should ensure everything possible is done to support you to live independently and manage your continence.

6 If you have concerns or need to complain

If you feel you are not receiving the advice or services you need, speak to your GP or the health professional who has been advising you. You may also like to discuss your concerns with a nurse on the Bladder and Bowel Foundation helpline. See section 7.

If you remain dissatisfied, your PCT PALS may be able to help. They can also explain the NHS complaints procedure and how to contact your Independent Complaints Advisory Service (ICAS) who can support you in making a complaint. See section 7. You may also like to read the Age Concern factsheet 66 *Resolving problems and making complaints about NHS care*.

7 Useful organisations

● Assist UK

Assist UK is the national voice for independent living centres. They can tell you if there is a centre near you offering free information and advice.

Tel: 0870 770 2866

Website: www.assist-uk.org

- **Bladder and Bowel Foundation**

The Foundation can provide information and advice on continence issues, tests and treatments and have specialist nurses who can help you by phone or email.

Specialist nurse helpline: 0845 345 0165

Website: www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org

- **British Red Cross**

The British Red Cross can provide information about branches offering short-term loans of equipment such as commodes.

Tel: 0844 871 11 11

Website: www.redcross.org.uk

- **Disabled Living Foundation**

The Disabled Living Foundation provides impartial advice and information on daily living aids, where to buy and hire them. It publishes factsheets on a variety of subjects including clothing for continence and incontinence.

Tel: 0845 130 9177

Website: www.dlf.org.uk

- **Independent Complaints Advocacy Service (ICAS)**

ICAS can support you if you wish to make a complaint about NHS services. NHS Direct can give you contact details for your local ICAS.

- **NHS Choices**

This NHS website gives comprehensive information on the causes, diagnosis and treatment of a wide range of conditions in the Health A-Z section.

Website: www.nhs.uk

- **NHS Direct**

NHS Direct has contact details for local NHS Services, PALS and ICAS.

Tel: 0845 4647

Website: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

● **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

There is a PALS service operating in every NHS Trust whether it is a PCT, hospital trust, foundation trust, ambulance trust or mental health trust. They can tell you about the services that operate in their trust and are keen to hear from patients who wish to make complimentary comments or express concerns about the services they receive.

Early intervention by PALS staff can help resolve problems before they become major issues or they can put you in touch with the complaints manager if you wish. PALS staff can also put you in touch with your Independent Complaints and Advocacy Service (ICAS). Trust staff or NHS Direct can provide contact details of your local PALS.

● **PromoCon**

PromoCon works as part of Disabled Living, Manchester, and can offer information and advice on specialist products for adults and children with bowel and bladder problems. You can visit the display of continence products at their showroom but it is advisable to book to ensure there will be an adviser available to help you.

Tel: 0161 834 2001

Website: www.promocon.co.uk

● **Royal Association of Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR)**

RADAR is a campaigning organisation that also has information on accessible toilets in towns across the UK.

Tel: 020 7250 3222

Website: www.radar.org.uk

8 Further information from Age Concern

Visit the Age Concern website, www.ageconcern.org.uk, or call our national Information Line on 0800 00 99 66 (free call) if you would like:

- to order copies of any of the Age Concern information materials mentioned in this factsheet
- to request information in large print
- further information about our full range of information products

- contact details for your nearest local Age Concern.

Books from Age Concern

Age Concern publishes a wide range of books for older people and those who care for and work with them. The following title may be of interest:

Your rights to money benefits 2009/10. All you need to know about the full range of benefits for the over 60s. £5.99

To order this book, or to view our full range of books, please visit our website www.ageconcern.org.uk/bookshop or call our book order line 0870 442 2120.

Age Concern and Help the Aged

Age Concern England and Help the Aged have joined together to form Age UK, a single charity dedicated to improving the lives of older people.

Age Concern and Help the Aged across the UK

To find out more about Age Concern and Help the Aged's work in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, contact:

Age Concern Northern Ireland

Tel: 028 9032 5055

Website: www.ageconcernni.org

Scottish Helpline for Older People (Age Concern Scotland)

Tel: 0845 125 9732

Websites: www.olderpeoplescotland.org.uk

www.ageconcernscotland.org.uk

Age Concern Cymru & Help the Aged in Wales

Tel: 029 2043 1555

Website: www.accymru.org.uk

Support our work

Age Concern is the largest provider of services to older people in the UK after the NHS. We make a difference to the lives of thousands of older people through local resources such as our befriending schemes, day centres and lunch clubs; by distributing free information materials; and through our national freephone helpline – the Age Concern Information Line 0800 00 99 66.

If you would like to support our work by making a donation please call Supporter Services on 020 8765 7527 (national call rate, Monday to Friday 9.15am–5pm) or visit www.ageconcern.org.uk

Legal statement

Age Concern England (charity number 261794) has merged with Help the Aged (charity number 272786) to form Age UK, a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England: registered office address 207-221 Pentonville Road, London, N1 9UZ, company number 6825798, registered charity number 1128267.

Age Concern and Help the Aged are brands of Age UK. The three national Age Concerns in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have also merged with Help the Aged in these nations to form three registered charities: Age Scotland, Age Northern Ireland, Age Cymru.

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This guide is not a comprehensive statement of the law in this subject and Age Concern and Help the Aged cannot give individual legal or financial advice. Some rules may have changed since the publication of this guide. If you have any queries that this guide does not answer, seek further advice from one of the organisations suggested.

Please note that the inclusion of named agencies, companies, products, services or publications in this factsheet does not constitute a recommendation or endorsement by Age Concern and Help the Aged. While every effort is made to ensure accuracy, Age Concern and Help the Aged cannot be held responsible for errors or omissions.

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