

BLADDER AND BOWEL MANAGEMENT AFTER A STROKE

This factsheet explains what may happen to your bladder and bowel after a stroke and outlines what support, treatments and services are available to help.

It is common for people to have problems controlling their bladder and/or bowels after a stroke. About half of all people admitted to hospital after a stroke will lose bladder control and a third will experience loss of bowel control. For the majority of people these problems will resolve over time, and for most people normal bladder and bowel function will resume within a year after their stroke. If you do continue to experience bowel and bladder problems, there is a lot of support available to you whether you are in hospital or at home.

Loss of bladder or bowel control is called incontinence. It is not just a physical problem; it also impacts on what people can do and how they feel. It can be a cause of considerable concern and distress as loss of toilet control is a very sensitive and personal issue. It is likely therefore to impact greatly on the person's quality of life and that of their carers and family.

What sort of bladder and bowel problems can occur after a stroke?

There are many different types of bladder and bowel problems that can occur as a result of stroke.

Bladder problems include:

- Frequency – needing to pass urine more often than normal.
- Urgency – feeling a sudden urgent and uncontrollable need to get to the toilet. Often there is not enough time to get there and incontinence can be unavoidable.
- Nocturnal incontinence – needing to go to the toilet several times during the night or wetting the bed while asleep.
- Functional incontinence – having trouble getting to the toilet on time because of problems with mobility, difficulty unfastening your clothes or being unable to communicate your need to get to the toilet.
- Reflex incontinence – this is also called neurogenic incontinence and means passing urine without realising it.
- Overflow incontinence – this happens when there is difficulty emptying the bladder, so it over-fills and leaks.

FACTSHEET

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Bowel problems may include:

- Faecal incontinence or uncontrolled bowel movement – this can be caused by damage to part of the brain controlling the bowel and can result in not being able to get to the toilet in time.
- Constipation (difficulty emptying your bowels) – this is very common and can be a result of being inactive for long periods of time, not eating or drinking as much as usual or delaying emptying your bowel when you need to.
- Constipation with overflow – large stools can block the bowel but liquid can flow around it causing watery stools to leak, often without warning.
- Faecal impaction – a loaded bowel can press on your bladder causing any bladder problems you might already have to become worse.

Why do bladder and bowel problems occur after a stroke?

You may have difficulty controlling your bladder and bowel function after a stroke for a number of reasons, such as:

- The stroke may have damaged the part of the brain that controls your bladder and/or your bowel and you might be unaware of the need to go to the toilet.
- You might have difficulty walking or moving or you may need help to get to or use the toilet and this can mean you cannot always get there in time.
- You may have communication difficulties so might not be able to tell anyone you need help getting to or using the toilet.
- If you are less mobile than usual then this can make you more prone to constipation. If you are not eating or drinking as much as usual then this can also mean you are more likely to experience constipation.
- Some medicines can affect bladder and bowel control.

It is important to remember that for the majority of people these problems will resolve over time but even if the problems persist in the longer term, there is a lot of help available.

How can I get help to manage my bladder or bowel function?

After your stroke and while you are in hospital, your medical team will assess your bladder and bowel function and suggest treatments to help you. You may also be referred to a specialist continence advisor.

If you are at home, your GP, stroke nurse, district or community nurse will be able to help you. They will aim to find the cause of your problems and work with you to develop an effective treatment programme. They can recommend exercises and strategies to help as well as help you retrain your bladder/bowel to improve control. They will also be able to suggest aids and equipment that may help.

You may be referred to see a specialist doctor who can investigate whether there is another reason for the changes in your bladder and/or bowel function.

A physiotherapist may also be able to help you by providing training and exercises to improve walking and moving in order to get to and use the toilet more easily.

A dietitian may recommend foods and the right amount of fluid to help you with your bladder and bowel movements.

Occupational therapists can help you regain your independence and support your recovery. They can also help if you need to have your home adapted in some way, such as having hand rails put up, or if you need any mobility equipment to make it easier to use the toilet, such as walking aids or a wheelchair.

Speech and language therapists can help with communication issues, for example if you are finding it difficult to let people know you need to go to the toilet.

What treatments are available?

There are various treatments available to help you manage your bladder and bowel function. Before a treatment plan is developed you will need to have an assessment. The assessment may include:

- Taking your medical history including any problems you might have had in the past and any current medication that could affect control
- Keeping a bladder and bowel diary to monitor your fluid intake and output over a number of days and record your bowel movements
- A urine analysis to check for infection
- A physical examination
- A bladder ultrasound scan
- Abdominal x-ray
- Specialist investigations to determine exactly how your bladder and bowel are working



Once the cause of your difficulties has been determined, a suitable treatment plan will be offered. This may include:

- Bladder training – this will help you hold more urine for longer periods of time by retraining your bladder.
- Bowel training – regular visits to the toilet and learning to delay bowel movements once on the toilet can help you improve your ability to control your bowel.

- Pelvic floor muscle exercises – these types of exercises help strengthen muscles to improve bladder control and improve or stop the leakage of urine.
- Medication – can help to reduce urine production and decrease urgency or frequency or help reduce movement in the bowel. Laxatives can also be used to help constipation and regulate bowel pattern.
- Use of a catheter – sometimes a catheter may be used. A catheter is a hollow tube inserted to drain urine from the bladder into a bag and so removing the need to go to the toilet at all.
- Use of continence products – pads, pants, bed and chair covers are available to help manage the effects of incontinence.
- Weight loss – if you are overweight, losing weight can often help improve bladder control in the long term.

What can I do to help myself?

- Try to drink at least 6-8 glasses (1.5-2 litres or 3-4 pints) of fluid (especially water) every day. This will help to keep your bladder healthy and avoid infections and constipation.
- Avoid or cut down on alcoholic drinks and drinks that contain caffeine, such as tea, coffee and coca-cola, as these can all irritate your bladder.
- Follow a balanced diet. Changes to your diet such as eating more fibre can help if you have constipation.
- Keep as active as you can and do your pelvic floor exercises if instructed (there are specialist physiotherapists that can help with this). Pelvic floor exercises can help to strengthen the muscles which support your bladder to improve or stop the leakage of urine. It is important to keep doing these exercises as it may take several weeks before you notice an improvement.
- See your GP if passing urine becomes painful, you feel unwell or have a fever, as you may have an infection and antibiotics or further investigation may be necessary.
- Adopt a routine to help you avoid episodes of incontinence.
- Wearing clothes that are easy to unfasten can help if you have difficulty with manual tasks. Velcro or elasticated waistbands can be quicker and easier than buttons or fiddly fasteners.



What practical products are available to help manage incontinence?

There are various continence products that can help you to cope with incontinence.

These include:

- High-absorbency pads and pull ups
- Absorbent, washable seat pads and mattress protectors
- A commode, which is useful to have in the bedroom during the night
- An alarm, to wake you up and alert you to regular visits to the toilet during the night
- Specialist products such as catheters, sheaths for men and urine collection devices for men and women

Living with bladder and bowel problems in the long term

If you are experiencing bladder and bowel problems in the longer term then there are some practical measures you can take that will help you to cope with the daily challenges you might face:

- Try to plan access to the toilet in advance, have a change of clothes to hand and carry a hygiene kit with you.
- Constant dampness on your skin can make it irritated so follow a good daily skincare routine that includes using products that cleanse without drying. Avoid using soap or wipes as these can make the skin too dry. Special creams can be prescribed by your doctor or nurse if required.
- Loss of bladder and bowel control can also affect your mood. If you can find someone you trust and who you can talk to, then do tell them how you are feeling. If you would rather speak to someone in confidence then call the CHSS Advice Line on 0808 801 0899 (free from landlines and mobiles) for someone to listen and give you additional help and advice.

If you are caring for someone

It can be difficult caring for someone with bladder and bowel problems as you want to make sure you preserve their comfort and dignity while looking after them. You may find it useful to speak to a specialist continence advisor or one of the organisations listed at the end of this factsheet. Take advice from the hospital doctor, GP or specialist nurses. You may also be able to get financial help with the extra costs of incontinence equipment if needed. CHSS provides small grants to people in financial difficulty because of chest, heart and stroke illness. To find out about other organisations that may be able to help with financial support call the CHSS Advice Line nurses.

For more information and advice about caring for someone who has had a stroke see the CHSS booklet 'Stroke: 'a carers' guide' for more information. The CHSS Advice Line nurses are also available to help with practical advice, including putting you in contact with your local support services.

Useful contacts:**Bladder & Bowel Foundation**

SATRA Innovation Park
Rockingham Road, Kettering, Northants, NN16 9JH
Helpline: 0845 345 0165
Email: info@bladderandbowelfoundation.org
Website: www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org

Provides information and support for people with bladder and bowel disorders.

Age UK Incontinence

Unit E, Stafford Park 18,
Telford, Shropshire, TF3 3BN
Tel: 0800 849 8032
Email: customerservices@incontinenceadvisors.co.uk
Website: www.ageukincontinence.co.uk

A continence advice and product ordering service.

PromoCon

Disabled Living, Burrows House, 10 Priestly Road
Worsley Industrial Estate, Worsley, Manchester, M28 2LY
Helpline: 0161 607 8219
Email: promocon@disabledliving.co.uk
Website: www.promocon.co.uk

Offers product information, advice and practical solutions for those affected by bladder and bowel problems.

Disabled Rights UK

Ground Floor, CAN Mezzanine, 49-51 East Road, London, N1 6AH
Tel: 0207 250 8191
Email: enquiries@disabilityrightsuk.org
Website: www.disabilityrightsuk.org

Operates the National Key Scheme for wheelchair accessible toilets, supplying keys and a list of local public access toilets across the UK.

If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,
please call the Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line Nurses

0808 801 0899

Call FREE from landlines and mobiles