

Many people with multiple sclerosis (MS) experience some form of bladder or bowel issues. Incontinence is the most common symptom for people with MS - the severity and longevity varies from person to person. With the right information and support, incontinence can be managed effectively to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle.

How MS can affect my 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 our ability to hold it all in. It comes from the Latin word 'continentia' which means 'a holding back', i.e. holding back bodily functions.

Incontinence is an accidental or involuntary loss of urine from the bladder (urinary incontinence) or bowel motion, faeces or wind from the bowel (faecal or bowel incontinence). It's a widespread condition affecting many Australians, so you shouldn't feel alone.

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.

What should I do if I experience continence issues?

If you have bladder or bowel concerns talk to your GP or MS Nurse about medication, aids, diet and lifestyle adjustments. Tell your neurologist about new and/or persistent symptoms. For serious concerns, you may be referred to a urologist (bladder) or gastroenterologist (bowel).

What else can I do to manage these symptoms?

Treatments

There are several medications to control bladder frequency and urgency, prescribed by a doctor or continence adviser. There are also treatments to help manage constipation that you can buy over the counter, but seek professional advice before purchase, to ensure you use the best option for your specific need.

Continence aids

Continence aids may help with your bladder or bowel issues. Speak with an MS nurse or continence adviser about tailored options to improve your individual situation.

Easy access at home/work

Small changes can make a big difference to bladder and bowel control issues, such as an easy-to-access toilet or bathroom.

Out and about

Peace of mind about toilet facilities and their locations can also make a big difference (check out the **National Toilet Map** below). Consider calling ahead to your destination to ensure there are adequate, accessible facilities.

Maintain a healthy diet

For anyone with bladder problems, it's still important to drink plenty of water to avoid complications such as urinary tract infections or constipation. Not enough water makes urine concentrated and irritates the bladder, causing more frequent urinating. Aim to drink 1.5 to 2 litres of fluid daily (preferably water, but discuss other safe forms of fluid with your GP), in three or four intervals. This way, you maintain your fluid intake but don't increase frequency. Avoid too much fluid for up to two hours before bed or going out.

A healthy bowel pattern also benefits from a well-balanced, high-fibre diet of foods such as oats, fruits (fresh, stewed or dried), vegetables and wholegrain or wholemeal foods including oatmeal, rice, wheat and barley, cereals and breads, also nuts and lentils.

Get moving

Regular exercise is important for everyone, especially for people with MS. Even for those with limited mobility, exercise improves your body's blood flow, including the gut, which helps prevent constipation. Regular exercise will also help you to maintain an ideal body weight. Excess body weight applies pressure to the area around your bladder and bowel.

Pelvic floor muscle exercises are another great way to help the bowel and bladder function properly and maintain continence.

Quit smoking

Smoking can increase coughing and, in turn, the risk of incontinence. Smoking can also cause other health problems, and has even been linked with the development and progression of MS.

What about sex?

Even with bladder and bowel issues, you and your partner can still enjoy intimacy. Discuss this with your partner or, for a tailored plan, your MS nurse or continence adviser.

Information and assistance:

General

There is support available to help you manage your MS:

- **Your GP** should be the first contact for any new and/or persistent continence concerns. MS nurses and other healthcare advisers can also help you to manage these symptoms on an ongoing basis.
- **Contact your state MS society** (details below) to access services such as MS nurses, peer support and other resources.
- Speak to your neurologist and other healthcare providers about the best approach to treatment management for your individual circumstances.
- For information about MS and MS treatments visit www.msaustralia.org.au
- **Contact details for your state MS organisations:**

MS Connect (Victoria, NSW, ACT and Tasmania)	1800 042 138	msconnect@ms.org.au	www.ms.org.au
MSWA (Western Australia)	1800 287 367	enquiries@mswa.org.au	www.mswa.org.au
MS Assist (South Australia and NT)	1800 812 311	msassist@ms.asn.au	www.ms.asn.au
MS Queensland	1800 287 367	mssociety@msqld.org.au	www.msqld.org.au

Continence-related and other organisations

The following support services may be able to provide wellbeing or other advice:

- The **Continence Foundation of Australia** (www.continence.org.au) has trained advisers and whilst 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) (developed through the National Continence Management Strategy) details over 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.
- **Independent Living Centres 1300 885 886** (www.ilcaustralia.org.au) has a range of products to assist with day-today living.
- **Carers Australia 1800 242 636** www.carersaustralia.com.au provides information and advice to carers, their friends and families about carer support and services.
- 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).
- The Department of Veteran's Affairs (DVA) **133 254** has various continence products for eligible veterans via the Rehabilitation Appliances Program (RAP). Speak with your doctor or the DVA.
- Other government-funded schemes provide financial assistance depending on your location, condition and products used. Speak with your local community nurse or continence adviser.

Sources: This fact sheet comprises material from previously published Australian MS Society leaflets plus Multiple Sclerosis (MS) UK Trust and Continence Foundation of Australia online resources (and associated references), and has been endorsed by both a medical expert and a person living with MS.

Disclaimer: This information was prepared by MS Australia. It is intended to provide useful and accurate information of a general nature and is not a substitute for medical advice.