

Bladder and bowel problems after stroke

Stroke Support Helpline: 0303 3033 100
or email: helpline@stroke.org.uk

Bladder and bowel problems are common after a stroke. Many people soon recover, but if you have longer-term problems, there are treatments and support that can help you get on with daily life.

A stroke often causes problems with bladder and bowel control. These often improve in the early weeks after the stroke, but up to a third of stroke survivors may have longer-term difficulties.

For many people, loss of bladder or bowel control (incontinence) is a very sensitive and personal issue that can affect their quality of life. You may feel embarrassed, upset or like you have lost your dignity, and it can impact family members involved in your care too. But there are treatments and support that can help and many problems can improve. If your daily life is being affected, there are often practical solutions to the problems.

The most important thing is to seek help. Tell a healthcare professional about any difficulties. Remember, even if it feels hard to talk about it, continence problems are common so you're not alone. Keeping problems hidden could mean missing out on treatment and support that can improve your wellbeing and help with your recovery.

How does a stroke affect bladder and bowel control?

Damage to brain cells

A stroke can damage part of the brain that controls your bladder or bowel. Signals between your brain and bladder and bowel muscles can be disrupted and affect your bladder or bowel control.

Urine retention can also happen soon after a stroke. You may find it difficult to empty your bladder and it may become very full, but this usually only lasts a short time for most people.

Movement, communication or cognitive problems

Some effects of a stroke can affect your continence. If you're having difficulty walking, you may not always get to the toilet in time. If you have to work harder to move around, the extra exertion can make it more difficult to maintain bladder or bowel control.

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If you have hand weakness, you might find it hard to unfasten or lower your clothes to go to the toilet.

If you have communication problems, it may be hard to ask for help in time to get to the toilet. If you have cognitive (memory and thinking) problems, you might not be aware when you need to go to the toilet, or struggle to find and use the toilet.

Constipation

Being less mobile than usual can make you more prone to constipation (not emptying your bowels regularly or finding it hard to poo). This may cause continence problems because a full bowel can put pressure on your bladder.

Stroke can sometimes change how you eat and drink. Not having enough fibre from your diet or not drinking enough can also lead to constipation.

Medication

Some medications can affect your bladder and bowels. For example, some types of blood pressure medication may affect bladder control or cause constipation when you start taking them. If you have any questions about your medication, ask your pharmacist. Do not stop taking any medication before speaking to a healthcare professional.

Being immobile or inactive

If you already had mild bladder or bowel problems before your stroke due to other reasons, these may be made worse by long periods of sitting or lying down.

Types of bladder and bowel problems after a stroke

Bladder problems

- **Frequency:** needing to pass urine (wee) more often than is usual for you.

- **Urgency incontinence:** feeling a sudden, urgent and uncontrollable need to wee. Often there is no time to get to the toilet, so you may wet yourself.
- **Stress incontinence:** small dribbles of wee leak when you cough, sneeze or laugh. This usually happens because the muscles in your pelvic floor are weak or damaged. It's possible to have a mix of stress and urgency incontinence.
- **Nocturia:** waking from sleep with an urgent need to wee.
- **Nocturnal enuresis:** wetting the bed while still asleep.
- **Functional incontinence:** when the physical effects of your stroke make it difficult for you to reach the toilet or unfasten your clothes in time.
- **Reflex incontinence:** passing urine without realising it. This happens when a stroke has affected the part of the brain that senses and controls bladder movement.
- **Overflow incontinence:** where the bladder leaks due to being too full. This can happen if you have lost feeling in your bladder and cannot tell you need to pass urine, or because you have difficulty emptying the bladder fully (known as urine retention).

Bowel problems

- **Faecal incontinence:** uncontrolled bowel movement. This can be caused by damage to the part of the brain controlling the bowel. It can also happen if you cannot get to the toilet in time, or if you have diarrhoea or constipation.
- **Constipation with overflow:** large stools (poo) can get stuck and block the bowel. Liquid stools may flow around it, causing watery stools to leak.
- **Faecal impaction:** dry, hard stools collect in the bowel. They can press on your bladder and make you feel you need to wee more often, or they can make it more difficult to empty your bladder.

Initial care after a stroke

If you have good bladder and bowel function but you cannot tell anyone when you need the toilet because of a communication difficulty, healthcare staff may offer you the toilet or commode every two hours or so. You could be offered a urinal, bedpan, or penile sheath (designed for men).

Until you can start to regain control of your bladder or bowel, you may be offered absorbent pads. These should be changed as soon as possible if they become soiled. Good hygiene and skin care are important to protect your skin from damage.

If your bladder is not emptying fully, then a catheter may be used to empty it. This involves inserting a fine tube into the urethra to drain urine from the bladder into a bag. This may need to be done several times to keep you comfortable and reduce the risk of developing a urinary tract infection (UTI).

Assessment

If you stay in hospital after your stroke, your healthcare team will carry out an assessment to find out the type of bladder or bowel difficulties you have and plan your treatment with you. The assessment may include:

- A history of any bladder and bowel problems you had before the stroke and your current medication.
- A diary recording what you drink and how much urine you pass over about three days.
- A urine test to rule out infections.
- A diary of your bowel movements.
- Other tests may include a physical examination, a bladder ultrasound scan, abdominal X-ray or specialist investigations to find out how the bladder and bowel are working.

Treatments for bladder problems

Once the cause of your bladder problem has been found, you will be offered advice and treatment. This may include:

- Drinking enough fluids. Strong, concentrated urine irritates your bladder. This can make feelings of urgency worse and can cause leakage and bladder infections. Caffeine or alcohol can also stimulate urine production, so you may be advised to reduce your caffeine or alcohol intake.
- Bladder training reduces urgency and frequency by gradually teaching your bladder to hold more urine. This is done by making timed visits to the toilet, and gradually extending the time between visits until your bladder learns how to 'hold on'.
- Pelvic floor exercises help strengthen muscles so that they provide support. This will help improve bladder control and improve or stop leakage of urine. You may be able to be referred to a specialist physiotherapist for help with these.
- Using medication to reduce feelings of urgency and frequency, or reduce the amount of urine your body makes.
- If you are overweight, losing some weight can often improve bladder control in the longer term.
- Stopping smoking. Coughing makes bladder leakage worse. Stopping smoking can help reduce coughing.
- Electrical stimulation devices, which can be inserted in either the vagina or the anus to stimulate and strengthen the muscles that control the bladder.
- A longer-term catheter or surgery may be considered for some persistent continence problems, if other treatments have not worked well or are unsuitable.

Treatments for bowel problems

Advice and treatment for bowel problems may include:

- Bowel retraining involves timed visits to the toilet. This is usually after meals, when the bowels are stimulated to move by a natural reflex. You also learn to delay bowel movements once on the toilet to improve your ability to 'hold on'.
- Pelvic floor exercises can strengthen the muscles that control bowel movement.
- Dietary changes, such as eating enough fibre.
- Drinking more fluids can help soften stools.
- Medication: laxatives may be used to treat chronic constipation and impacted stool, which is the most common cause of leaking faeces (poo). If you have true diarrhoea, other medications can help. It's important you seek help first to find out what is causing your bowel problem.
- Enema or bowel irrigation may be used to clear the bowel if faecal impaction occurs.

Which professionals can help me?

Bladder and bowel problems can be treated by a range of healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses and therapists. Incontinence can affect all aspects of your life and health, so you may need different types of help with your individual needs. It's vital you seek treatment, because most bladder and bowel problems can be improved.

Getting treatment

Your medical and nursing team will assess and treat your bladder and bowel problems. They should help you to understand the causes of your problems. They should also support you to make lifestyle changes and carry out exercises and training to manage your bladder and bowel. If you still have continence problems after two weeks, you should be reassessed.

If you are caring for a stroke survivor with bowel or bladder problems, you should be given advice and training on how to help them too.

Continence advisers are specialist nurses who are trained to treat bladder and bowel problems. They can fully assess your individual needs and develop a plan with you that fits your personal circumstances. After you've been discharged from hospital, your GP surgery can provide further advice on what services are available in your area. Some organisations listed in '**Other sources of help and information**' at the end of this guide can also help you find a continence clinic.

You may need to see a specialist consultant, such as a urologist, gastroenterologist, gynaecologist or geriatrician. Your GP surgery can refer you if appropriate.

Help with daily life

If you need support to cope day-to-day at home after a stroke, contact your local council's adult social services department (or health and social care trust in Northern Ireland). They can arrange a care needs assessment.

Occupational therapists can help you regain your independence through activities to support your recovery. They can also help if your home needs to be adapted, or if you need equipment to make it easier to get to and use the toilet. This could include walking aids, hand rails or raised toilet seats. See stroke.org.uk/equipment for more information.

You might need an assessment through your local NHS continence service to see if you're eligible to receive a free, regular supply of continence products, such as pads. Eligibility varies throughout the UK.

Dietitians can recommend a suitable, well-balanced diet and fluid intake, as well as any dietary changes that may help you.

Living well with incontinence

With good advice and some preparation, bladder and bowel problems can be managed discreetly as part of everyday life.

Planning ahead when you go out

Planning access to toilets before you go out will help you manage better. If you are going somewhere unfamiliar, there are websites and apps which list public toilet locations.

It can also be helpful to bring a change of clothing and a hygiene kit with you. This might include plastic bags, soap, a flannel, anti-bacterial wet wipes and disposable gloves.

The National Key Scheme (NKS), also known as the RADAR Scheme, provides keys to public disabled toilets.

The scheme is available to people with disabilities or health conditions seriously affecting their continence. Keys can be bought from organisations including Disability Rights UK and some local councils.

The Just Can't Wait toilet card is available from organisations including Bladder & Bowel UK. Showing this card discreetly allows you to access toilets in many locations, such as cafes, shops and businesses. You can order a free card from bbuk.org.uk or see '**Other sources of help and information**' at the end of this guide for more information.

Find a routine that works for you

A daily routine of regular visits to the toilet, staying hydrated during the day and reducing the amount you drink just before bedtime, should help avoid accidents. An alarm can be used to schedule a visit to the toilet during the night, or you may prefer a moisture alarm on your bed. This will sound when wetness is detected and is designed to wake you so you can finish emptying your bladder in the toilet.

You may wish to wear a silent vibrating alarm watch, which can be set to give a discreet reminder at regular intervals. A silent alarm is also useful at night to avoid disturbing others.

Continence products

There are various continence products available. Your GP surgery or continence adviser can tell you what is provided free of charge through your local NHS and what you can buy yourself.

Absorbent products, such as incontinence pads or pull-on pants, can help absorb leaks. If you cannot get them free through your local NHS, you can buy them from most supermarkets, pharmacies, by mail order or online. If you buy them online or by mail order, you might need to complete an exemption form so you do not pay VAT (tax) on them.

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Continence advisers or GPs may prescribe specialised products. They include catheters, anal inserts, urine drainage bags and appliances for men.

Keeping skin healthy

Moisture, friction and bacteria due to urine or faeces next to your skin can cause skin rashes and infection. Careful hygiene and skin care are needed to avoid the risk of skin damage, such as redness, soreness and blistering (incontinence-associated dermatitis). Your healthcare professional can advise you on any products you may need to help keep your skin clean and dry.

Catheters

If your skin is badly affected, or you have significant, long-term continence problems which have not been successfully treated with other measures, an 'indwelling' catheter may be recommended. This is where a tube from your bladder drains into a bag that is attached to your leg under your clothing. This is generally used only as a last resort, as the risks can outweigh the benefits. Some catheters use a valve instead which you can open to drain urine.

In some cases, a suprapubic catheter, where the catheter is inserted into the bladder through the abdomen, may prove a more convenient method of permanent drainage. Your continence adviser should be able to explain your options and answer any questions you have.

Self-help tips

- Know your own bladder and bowel patterns and try to stick to your routine. Don't go to the toilet 'just in case'. Go when you feel the need to go.
- Remember to follow all the bladder and bowel training tips and exercises your nurse or continence adviser has given you.

It takes time for the effects to show, so keep going with them.

- Drink enough fluids during the day. This will help to avoid bladder infections and constipation. Try to have 6–8 glasses of fluid each day, unless advised otherwise by a healthcare professional. You may need to drink more if you have a catheter.
- Cut down on caffeinated drinks, such as tea, coffee and cola, and avoid fizzy drinks as they can irritate the bladder. Alcoholic drinks can cause dehydration as they can make you need to wee more often.
- Eat a balanced diet with plenty of different fruit and vegetables. They contain valuable fibre, which helps bowel movements.
- Keep as active as you can. This can help to reduce bladder leakage and will help to stimulate your bowel to move regularly.
- Empty your bladder fully when you go to the toilet. This can help to avoid infections. Sometimes sitting for longer can help, or you could try standing up and sitting down again.
- Wear clothes that are quick to remove, such as skirts or trousers with elasticated waistbands. You can also buy adapted clothing with Velcro fastenings which are easier to undo with one hand.
- If you need to wee frequently at night, avoid caffeine and alcohol later in the day, and try drinking less fluids as you approach bedtime. You can buy washable, waterproof bedding to help catch any leaks in bed.
- Take care of your skin by using mild soap or specialised products, and clean and dry your skin gently and thoroughly.
- Dispose of wet or soiled products safely. Ensure disposal bags are secure and leak-proof and use a bin with a lid.
- Carry a Just Can't Wait card and a RADAR toilet key if you're going out.
- Remember you're not alone. You can connect with others who understand stroke first-hand and share tips on our Online Community. Visit onlinecommunity.stroke.org.uk

Help for families and carers

If you're supporting someone with bladder or bowel problems, it can be a lot to cope with. It can feel like a change in your relationship with the person too if you're involved with their personal care. You and your loved one may find it difficult to preserve their comfort and dignity while following a toileting routine, giving and receiving intimate care, or dealing with soiled clothes and bed linen.

Healthcare professionals should involve you and the stroke survivor in developing their incontinence treatment plan, and offer you any training you need to support the person. You may find it useful to speak to a specialist continence adviser or one of the organisations listed in '**Other sources of help and information**' in this guide. They can talk through your questions and concerns, help you consider all the options and make practical arrangements.

If you feel you need more support with your caring role, contact social services at your local council to ask for a carer's assessment. You may be eligible for some support, such as respite care or training in safe lifting. Find out more at stroke.org.uk/caring

Our Stroke Support Helpline can answer questions you may have or help you find other sources of support. You can also connect with others who have experience of supporting stroke survivors on our Online Community at onlinecommunity.stroke.org.uk

Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

Stroke Support Helpline

Our Stroke Support Helpline offers information and support for anyone affected by stroke, including family, friends and carers.

Call us on **0303 3033 100**,
Textphone **18001 0303 3033 100**
Email helpline@stroke.org.uk

Read our information

Log onto stroke.org.uk, where you can find easy-to-understand information, videos and an online community to support you. You can also call our Stroke Support Helpline for printed copies of our guides.

Other useful organisations

Age UK Incontinence

Website: ageukincontinence.co.uk
Tel: **0800 046 1501**

An online shop and advice service owned by Age UK. It sells a wide range of products to support with bladder and bowel problems.

Bladder and Bowel Community

Website: bladderandbowel.org
Home delivery line: **0800 031 5406**

Sells products and gives information about continence and finding help. They offer RADAR keys and a free, downloadable 'Just Can't Wait' toilet card, to help you get access to toilets while out and about.

Bladder & Bowel UK

Website: bbuk.org.uk
Helpline: **0161 214 4591**

Confidential helpline providing advice, information and support for adults and children with bladder and bowel problems. Provides details of products, equipment and services for people with continence problems.

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Changing Places

Website: changing-places.org

Offers a tool to search for public toilets accessible to people with complex disabilities.

Continence Product Adviser

Website: continenceproductadvisor.org

Introduces and explains a range of products for men and women living with bladder and bowel problems.

Disability Rights UK

Website: shop.disabilityrightsuk.org

Gives information on the National Key Scheme for wheelchair accessible toilets and sells RADAR keys at a small cost.

Great British Public Toilet Map

Website: toiletmap.org.uk

A searchable database of UK public toilets, including accessible toilets.

Living Made Easy

Website: livingmadeeasy.org.uk

Helpline: 0300 999 0004

Offers information and products for personal care.

About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That's why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.

How did we do?

To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at feedback@stroke.org.uk

Accessible formats

Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.

Always get individual advice

This guide contains general information about stroke. But if you have a problem, you should get individual advice from a professional such as a GP or pharmacist. Our Stroke Support Helpline can also help you find support. We work very hard to give you the latest facts, but some things change. We don't control the information provided by other organisations or websites.

You know more than most just how shocking and confusing having a stroke is. We're here to support you and your family find the strength and determination to get back to life.

Learn more about stroke support: stroke.org.uk

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