

# Bladder Health



## Introduction

Although people often think urinary incontinence is something that occurs naturally with age, it is not part of the normal process of aging! Incontinence is often a symptom of an underlying health issue.

Urinary incontinence is defined as an uncontrolled loss of bladder control causing leaking of urine.

Incontinence care is known to be one of the biggest causes of stress for caregivers. You may have questions about urinary incontinence such as:

- What can cause urinary incontinence?
- What type of incontinence is the person I care for experiencing?
- What are the strategies to manage incontinence?
- How do I talk to the person I am caring for about this issue?

## Did You Know?

Urinary incontinence can occur in people of all ages and it can cause:

- Social isolation and embarrassment.
- Decreased movement.
- Skin issues.
- Embarrassment.
- Falls.
- Depression and anxiety.
- Loss of intimacy.
- Financial burden.

This chapter may help you answer some of these questions. By applying, and adapting the strategies in this chapter, you can help enhance the comfort of the person you care for.

*The information in this chapter is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified health care professional. Please consult your health care professional for advice about specific medical conditions. Look for our [helpful tips on communicating effectively with health care professionals](#).*

### What about bowel incontinence?

Bowel incontinence is the involuntary loss of stool from the bowel and is much less common than urinary incontinence. For more information, refer to the guide provided by the Canadian Continence Foundation: [Tool 5.1.4: Bowel Incontinence](#).

## The Underlying Causes of Urinary Incontinence

### What could be causing urinary incontinence?

By understanding what can cause urinary incontinence, you will be better able to identify the type of incontinence the person is experiencing. The following list highlights some of the most common causes of urinary incontinence:

- **Infection:** one of the most common causes of incontinence is a urinary tract infection (UTI).
  - **UTI Symptoms:** common signs include burning when urinating, going to the bathroom frequently, and an urgent feeling to urinate.
- **Changes in the brain and thinking:** delirium and dementia can make a person unable to recognize the bathroom/toilet or remember how to get to it.
- **Changes in the body:**
  - Thinning of the walls of the urethra.
  - Inflammation of the vagina (vaginitis).
- **Medications:** Some medications force the body to release fluid from the body.
- **Mental Health:** Some medications taken for depression or mental health can cause a person to urinate more.
- **Heart Health:** Issues with the heart's ability to pump effectively can cause a person to have to urinate often due to buildup of fluid in the body.



- **Mobility Problems:** Difficulties with moving, walking and getting around can cause a person to be unable to get to a bathroom quickly or independently.
- **Constipation:** Straining to have a bowel movement can weaken the pelvic floor muscles. These muscles are important for urinary control. Also, a full bowel can press against the bladder and sometimes block the passing of urine, causing urine to leak.
- **Constipation Symptoms:** Common signs include one or fewer bowel movements in two days, movements that are difficult to pass and are hard or dry. For even more information, you can look at the Bristol Stool Chart for a simple way to gauge if the person you are caring for is constipated (See [Tool 5.1.1: Bristol Stool Chart](#)).

## Types of Urinary Incontinence

### What type of urinary incontinence are you noticing?

There are different types of incontinence. By knowing how to identify them, you will be better prepared to:

- Have conversations with the person about incontinence.
- Consider appropriate strategies to manage incontinence.
- Have more detailed conversations with health care professional about incontinence.

### Myths about Bladder Health

#### **X** *Being incontinent of urine is part of the natural process of aging.*

Although it is a common misbelief, urinary incontinence should not be considered part of the natural process of aging. Urinary incontinence is often the sign of an underlying health issue.

#### **X** *There is no treatment for urinary incontinence.*

There are many possible treatment options for urinary incontinence. It is important to understand the different types and their causes in order to begin to talk about treatment. (See [Types of Incontinence](#).)

#### **X** *The best way to avoid urinary incontinence is to drink less fluids.*

Drinking less does not cause a person to become less incontinent of urine. Drinking less can lead to serious health problems like dehydration, constipation, urinary tract infections, urinary frequency, confused thinking (delirium), and low blood pressure and dizziness when moving from a low to high position like sitting to standing (postural hypotension).

The following is a table showing six types of urinary incontinence and their underlying causes:<sup>12</sup>

Type	Most Common Cause
<b>Functional</b>	Not being able to get to the bathroom on time due to reasons other than the bladder or urinary system (problems walking, with memory/thinking, medications, etc.).
<b>Transient</b>	Other health issues that can be easily treated if recognized (e.g. urinary tract infection). (See Causes of Urinary Incontinence.)
<b>Stress</b>	Weak muscles in the urinary system and sudden exertion (e.g. sneezing, coughing, laughing, etc.).
<b>Urge</b>	Sudden or urgent need to urinate caused by issues with the bladder (an infection).
<b>Overflow</b>	An overly full bladder as a result of a blockage (e.g. constipation) or weak bladder muscles.
<b>Total</b>	Complete loss of bladder control as a result of neurological health conditions (spinal cord damage, multiple sclerosis, etc.).

<sup>12</sup> Adapted from RGP of Toronto. (2018). *SF7 Toolkit*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rgptoronto.ca/resources/>



## Strategies to Manage Urinary Incontinence

What can you do about urinary incontinence right now?

### Have the conversation.

Below are a few ways you might word a conversation with the person you care for about urinary incontinence. Above all, it is important to maintain respect and dignity.

- Example 1: “Some people experience urine or wetness when they cough or sneeze, does your bladder cause you any concern or embarrassment?”
- Example 2: “Is it sometimes difficult for you to get to the bathroom in time? How often is this happening?”
- Example 3: “Do you feel you have to rush to the toilet?”

### Make small changes.

Staying hydrated is often the best remedy for constipation

- Encourage six to eight glasses of fluid per day (e.g. water).
- Refer to a Urine Colour Chart for a simple way to see if the person you are caring for is drinking enough ([See Tool 5.1.2: Urine Colour Chart](#)).
- Avoid the foods/fluids that irritate the bladder (e.g. caffeine, alcohol, carbonated drinks).
- Ask the older adult if they would switch to decaffeinated beverages.
- Suggest clothing that makes independence in the bathroom a little easier (e.g. pants with an elastic waistband).

### Schedule.

Encourage a trip to the bathroom every three to four hours to empty the bladder, and also right before bed.

## Managing Urinary Incontinence on an Ongoing Basis

### Keep track.

Encourage the person you care for to keep track of their urinary symptoms over several days in a bladder diary (See [Tool 5.2: Bladder Diary](#)).

### Support emotional health.

- Be mindful of the words you use to describe products (e.g. instead of using the term “diaper” try using a term like “product” or “brief” or any other word that you and the person you care for agree to).
- Maintain dignity and ease embarrassment or anxiety by protecting the furniture. Add layers of protection to their bed/chair. For ideas on how to protect furniture, see [Tool 5.1.3: Incontinence Pads for Beds](#).

### Encourage independence.

Encourage the person you care for to stay as active as possible and to have appropriate equipment in the bathroom that allows them to do as much on their own as possible.

### Speak to a health care professional.

Health care professionals can help identify causes of urinary incontinence and create a care plan with you and/or refer you to a specialist in your area. They can also prescribe different treatments for certain types/causes of incontinence. See [helpful tips to communicate with health care professionals](#).

## Managing the Impact of Urinary Incontinence on the Relationship

You may find that urinary incontinence creates stress on the caregiving relationship at times. Although this experience is different for each caregiver, the following are three key ways to manage the stress that caregivers can feel due to urinary incontinence:

### 1. Try to be patient.

Patience will ease your stress and the stress of the person you are caring for.

### 2. Look for ways to be prepared.

- Having a small incontinence bag at the ready can make life easier when out of the house. This kit may include a change of pants, socks, and cleansing wipes.
- For men with mobility issues, sitting on the toilet and using a hand held urinal to urinate can cause less stress and mess.

### 3. Ask for help if you need it.

You can ask for help during a conversation with a health care professional. See [helpful tips to communicate with health care professionals](#).



## Helpful Tips to Communicate with Health Care Professionals

Urinary incontinence is a sensitive topic. A challenge faced by many caregivers is how to communicate with health care professionals about urinary incontinence. It's important to be prepared to speak with health care professionals so that they can provide the right help at the right time. Get permission from the person you are caring for to speak to a health care professional about their incontinence, or speak to one together.

The following are some helpful tips on how to communicate with health care professionals:

### Offer detail.

- The more detail you can provide, the more a health care professional can help.
- Details like blood in the urine need to be brought to the attention of a health care professional as soon as possible.
- Share a copy of your bladder diary (See Tool 5.2: Bladder Diary).
- Be prepared to answer questions about the person's incontinence, such as: when did it start, what symptoms went along with it, is it worse at night, etc.
- Beyond explaining who you are and the relationship you have with the person, offer details about your caregiving role, and the support you provide.

### Ask questions.

- What supports does the community have to offer for urinary incontinence? Health care professionals should have knowledge about geriatric teams, continence experts, and other community programs that can support you and the person you are caring for. They will be able to tell you and the person you care for about these services and if they think a referral is needed.

### Why aren't people talking about incontinence?

Urinary incontinence is typically not discussed for two main reasons:

1. People do not like to talk about urinary incontinence due to embarrassment, and
2. Health care professionals may not ask their patients about it.

Talking about incontinence is the first step to treatments and/or symptom management.

## Finding Additional Support

How do you find additional support related to urinary incontinence?

### Ask a health care professional.

- Ask a qualified professional who can point you to the right resources.

### Look online.

- You can search for specialists or programs by going online and browsing the Healthline, health services for Ontario website. To access the Healthline website: [www.thehealthline.ca/](http://www.thehealthline.ca/).
- To learn more about incontinence products, visit the Ontario Incontinence Supplies website at: <https://www.ontarioincontinencesupplies.com/Default.asp>.

### Read.

- You can learn more about incontinence and incontinence products in this guide created by the Canadian Continence Foundation: [The Source – Your Guide to Better Bladder Control](#).

## Summary

This chapter has provided you with some of the causes and types of urinary incontinence. It has also shared strategies to recognize and manage incontinence. You can start to develop your own personalized strategies to help the person you care for manage incontinence and find the support you need.



## Tool 5.1: Incontinence Resources

### 5.1.1 Bristol Stool Chart

For a simple way to check if the person you are caring for is constipated, use the Bristol Stool Chart as a reference. Health care professionals use this tool in practice. For more information, visit: <https://www.continence.org.au/pages/bristol-stool-chart.html>.

### 5.1.2 Urine Colour Chart

For a simple way to check to see if the person you are caring for is getting enough fluid, you can check the colour of their urine. For more information, visit: [https://cdn4.sportngin.com/attachments/document/0057/2892/Urine\\_Color\\_Chart.pdf](https://cdn4.sportngin.com/attachments/document/0057/2892/Urine_Color_Chart.pdf).

### 5.1.3 Incontinence Pads for Beds

Explore the Daily Caring Website for more information on how to protect the couch and bed from leaks. By protecting the furniture, you can maintain dignity, ease a person's anxiety and embarrassment.

For more information, visit: <https://dailycaring.com/incontinence-pads-for-beds-layers-work/>.

### 5.1.4 Bowel Incontinence

The Canadian Continence Foundation is a great website that includes information and resources for bowel incontinence (fecal incontinence). This website is a great start for a caregiver who wants to learn the basic facts and where to go for additional support. For more information, visit: <http://www.canadiancontinence.ca/EN/fecal-incontinence.php>.

### Tool 5.2: Bladder Diary<sup>13</sup>

Encourage the person you are caring for to complete this tool throughout the day, or ask if you can help them complete it. Try to complete this tool over several days in a row to gather enough background information. This tool can be very helpful when communicating with a health care professional.

Bladder Health | Caregiving Strategies Handbook

**Bladder Diary: Day \_\_\_\_\_**

Time	Urination		Was it Urgent?		Was there Leakage?		Drinks	
	How many times?	How much? (Sm., Med., Lg.)	Yes	No	How many times?	How much? (Sm., Med., Lg.)	Type	How much?
Example	1	Medium	Yes		Once	Small	Water	2 cups
6 - 10 am								
10 - 2 pm								
2 - 6 pm								
6 - 10 pm								
10 - 2 am								
2 - 6 am								

[www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies](http://www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies) 

<sup>13</sup> Adapted from: The Canadian Continence Foundation. (2018). *The Source: your guide to bladder control*. Retrieved from: <http://www.canadiancontinence.ca/pdfs/The-Source.pdf>



## References

### Bladder Health

Cassells, C., & Watt, E. (2003). The impact of incontinence on older spousal caregivers. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 42(6), 607-16.

Daily Caring. (2019). *Incontinence pads for beds: layers keep things dry*. Retrieved from: <https://dailycaring.com/incontinence-pads-for-beds-layers-work/>.

Family Caregiver Alliance. (2012). *Incontinence Care*. Retrieved from <https://www.caregiver.org/incontinence-care>.

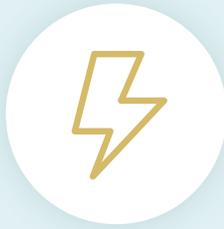
RGP of Toronto. (2018). *SF7 Toolkit*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rgptoronto.ca/resources/>.

The Canadian Continence Foundation. (2014). *The impact of incontinence in Canada a briefing document for policy makers*. Cameron Institute, Retrieved from: <http://www.canadiancontinence.ca/pdfs/en-impact-of-incontinence-in-canada-2014.pdf>.

The Canadian Continence Foundation. (2018). *Different types of urinary incontinence* Copyright ©, Retrieved from: <http://www.canadiancontinence.ca/EN/types-of-urinary-incontinence.php>.

The Canadian Continence Foundation. (2018). *Bladder Diary* Copyright ©, Retrieved from: <http://www.canadiancontinence.ca/pdfs/Bladder-Diary.pdf>.

The Canadian Continence Foundation. (2018). *The Source: your guide to bladder control* Copyright ©. Retrieved from: <http://www.canadiancontinence.ca/pdfs/Source-2018/The-Source-2018-English.pdf>.



© 2019 Regional Geriatric Programs (RGPs) of Ontario.  
Permission granted to use without editing and with appropriate citation.

If reproducing or adapting the content in the handbook, RGPO must be credited as the author with the following citation:

Regional Geriatric Programs of Ontario. (2019). Caregiving Strategies Handbook: Providing Care and Support for a Senior Living with Frailty. Retrieved from [www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies](http://www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies)

---

For more information on the Senior Friendly Caregiver Education Project and the Regional Geriatric Programs of Ontario, please visit [www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies](http://www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies).

