



Information Sheet

Continence: faecal incontinence

Faecal incontinence is the inability to control passing of faeces (bowel motion). This can include both major accidents where the bowel is unintentionally emptied or minor faecal smearing.

Faecal incontinence can be very distressing and may affect a person's quality of life including social, occupational and recreational activities. People with faecal incontinence may be too embarrassed to seek professional help; however it is important that the causes of faecal incontinence are identified by a doctor so that appropriate treatment can be planned.



Contributing factors that can lead to an inability to control the bowel may include medical conditions, lifestyle factors and long term straining when going to the toilet which can weaken pelvic floor muscles. Other factors that can affect bowel function include anxiety, medications, diet and fluid intake and the accessibility of appropriate toileting facilities.

Healthy Bowel Habits

Normal bowel habits vary from one person to another and can range from bowel motions three times a day to once every three days.

Bowel habits are generally considered healthy if bowel motions are regular, soft and well formed, easy to pass without straining or pain, there is no accidental loss of faeces and the bowel motion should not take more than a minute to completely empty the bowel.

To maintain healthy bowel habits it is recommended to drink 6–8 glasses of fluid per day (unless otherwise advised by the doctor), consume a diet of adequate dietary fibre, exercise regularly, to not strain and to allow sufficient time to empty the bowel completely when going to the toilet.

Causes of Faecal Incontinence

Faecal incontinence can have numerous possible causes, including:

- ▶ **Anal Conditions:** Including anal sphincter damage or injury, haemorrhoids or prolapse.
- ▶ **Nerve Damage:** Some neurological conditions (such as spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, spina bifida, Parkinson's disease etc) may cause lack of sensation or inability to make muscles work effectively.

- ▶ **Constipation:** The bowel motion may be infrequent, hard and difficult to pass, and cause pain or discomfort. Contributing factors include low fluid intake, not enough dietary fibre, a change in diet, ignoring the feeling of going to the toilet to pass a bowel motion, poor position when sitting on the toilet, lack of exercise or immobility, poor health, some medications, and disorders of the bowel. Severe constipation may cause leakage from the bowel (overflow diarrhoea).
- ▶ **Diarrhoea:** Passing of frequent urgent and loose bowel motions. Diarrhoea has many possible causes including use of laxatives, some medications, food allergies or intolerances, infection and bowel diseases.
- ▶ **Weakness of pelvic floor muscles** can also contribute to difficulty controlling wind, soiling and faecal urgency.

Treatment for Faecal Incontinence

The cause of faecal incontinence needs to be identified by a doctor and appropriate treatment implemented. This might include changes to diet and medications, pelvic floor muscle retraining and strengthening to manage and improve the incontinence, and in some cases surgery may be indicated depending on the cause.

For situations where faecal incontinence cannot be cured the use of continence products may be required to manage and contain the incontinence.

Management of Faecal Incontinence

Faecal incontinence can impact on all aspects of a person's life including self-esteem and dignity, employment, travel, recreation and routine daily activities.

Management strategies include practical daily living equipment, absorbent continence products, continence funding scheme information, adapted clothing, skin care and odour control products, and education and information.

- ▶ **Practical Daily Living Equipment:** There is a large range of equipment available to assist toileting. This may include toilet seat raisers, over toilet frames, grab rails, commode chairs, bottom wipers, bed pans and bidets. It is recommended that guidance from a health professional, such as an occupational therapist, is sought to assist with appropriate equipment selection to suit individual needs.
- ▶ **Continence Products** may be needed to manage and contain faecal incontinence. Disposable products are generally more suitable than washable products for faecal incontinence. Disposable continence products include a large range of pads, pants and all-in-ones. Once a continence product is soiled it should be changed as soon as possible to manage odour, discomfort and reduce skin irritation. Anal plugs may also be a consideration for some people with faecal incontinence, however, it is important that this is discussed first with a doctor to determine suitability.
- ▶ **Continence Funding Schemes:** People with permanent and ongoing incontinence may be eligible for financial assistance from a continence funding scheme for some of the products required to manage the condition. For more information talk to a doctor, continence nurse advisor or contact the Continence Resource Centre on the details provided below.

- ▶ **Adapted Clothing:** Adaptations to clothing may help reduce the time taken to access a toilet, for example, using a nightie with a flap that opens at the back or trousers where the side seams are secured with hook and loop fastening can decrease the time taken to undress prior to using a toilet.
- ▶ **Skin Care:** Skin irritation can be common for someone with ongoing faecal incontinence. The acidity and bacteria in faeces may cause irritation, redness and skin fungal infections. To help maintain skin integrity, skin should be cleansed and dried after each episode of incontinence. Skin care products are available to assist those with incontinence and include cleansers, barrier creams and moisturisers. It is important to contact a doctor or continence nurse advisor for assistance with skin care.
- ▶ **Odour Control:** Odour control products are available which neutralize the odours of incontinence. These are available in sprays and pump packs.



Education and Information

There are a number of health professionals who have been specifically trained to help people with faecal incontinence. These may include general practitioners, continence nurse advisors, continence physiotherapists and medical specialists such as colorectal surgeons.

Specialised resource services are also available to provide information regarding continence services, funding and community resources. These include:

The Continence Resource Centre

Located at the Independent Living Centre (ILC) the Continence Resource Centre provides a free, statewide continence information and advisory service. The Continence Resource Centre is funded by the Department for Families and Communities (DFC) and works in partnership with the Continence Foundation of Australia. Staffed by a registered nurse, information is available to all community members including clients, carers, families and health professionals. Services provided include information on continence management, continence services available in both metropolitan and regional areas of South Australia, continence funding schemes and continence product information. The Continence Resource Centre services are free of charge and the service is available 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday. See below for further contact details.

www.sa.gov.au/disability or call 8266 5260

The National Continence Helpline

The National Continence Helpline is an Australian Government initiative, staffed by a team of continence nurse advisors who provide information and advice about a range of bladder and bowel problems. The Helpline is managed by the Continence Foundation of Australia and operates 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday AEST.

The Helpline continence nurse advisors provide confidential information and also provide free information brochures and fact sheets on bladder and bowel problems.

www.continence.org.au or call 1800 33 00 66

Australian Government Bladder Bowel

This website provides information on many aspects of incontinence for community people and health professionals

www.bladderbowel.gov.au or call 1800 33 00 66 (National Continence Helpline)

The National Public Toilet Map

This website shows the location of public toilets in each town of Australia.

www.toiletmap.gov.au or call 1800 990 646

The Continence Foundation of Australia

The Continence Foundation of Australia is the national peak body for continence management, promotion and advocacy. The website lists many printed resources available and other information on incontinence.

www.continence.org.au or call 1800 330 066

For further information on faecal or other types of incontinence, please contact the Continence Resource Centre. The Continence Resource Centre is located at the Independent Living Centre.

The Independent Living Centre offers free advice on equipment and techniques to help you with everyday tasks.

Independent Living Centre

11 Blacks Road
Gilles Plains SA 5086

Phone: 1300 885 886 (SA & NT callers only) or (08) 8266 5260

Fax: (08) 8266 5263

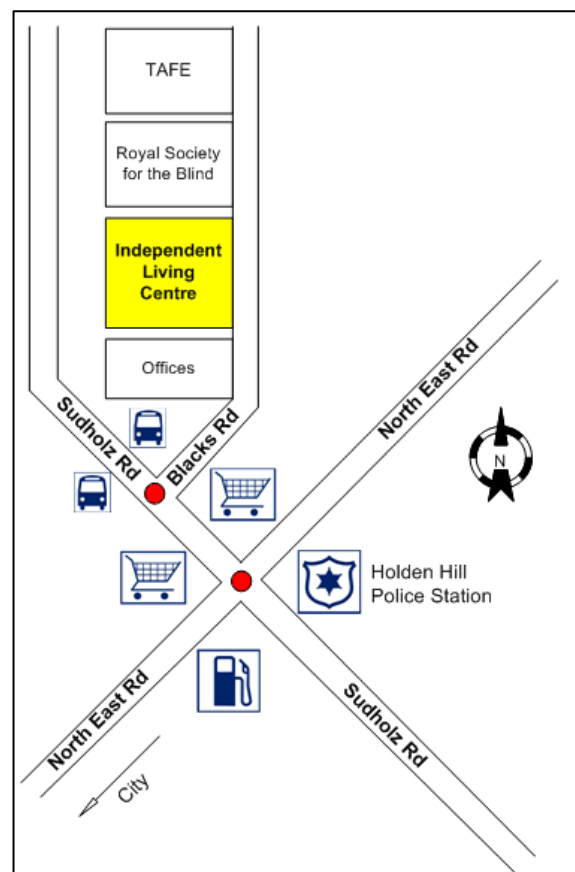
Email: ilcsa@dfc.sa.gov.au

Website: www.sa.gov.au/disability/ilc

Accessible off street parking is available.

Bus routes:

From the city T500/T501 or 207/208 to Stop 28 Sudholz Road
Timetable information: 8210 1000



Copies of this publication are available from the Disability Information Service
Tel: 1300 786 117 Email: disabilityinfo@dfc.sa.gov.au Website: www.sa.gov.au/disability Version: June 2011



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