



MENOPAUSE AND BLADDER AND BOWEL

Menopause is a significant time of change in a woman's life. For many women this may lead to issues with bladder and bowel control (incontinence)

Menopause is described as the final menstrual period. You know when this has happened when you have not had a period for 12 months. In leading up to menopause many women experience symptoms such as hot flushes, night sweats, vaginal changes and mood swings.

Symptoms associated with menopause affecting the bladder and bowel include:

- ⇒ Passing urine more often (frequency)
- ⇒ Urine leakage when coughing, sneezing or during exercise (stress incontinence)
- ⇒ Urine leakage on the way to the toilet (urge incontinence)
- ⇒ Waking during the night to urinate (nocturia)
- ⇒ Repeated urinary tract infections
- ⇒ Rushing to the toilet (urgency)
- ⇒ Difficulty controlling wind
- ⇒ Constipation
- ⇒ Difficulty controlling the bowel (faecal incontinence).

Ignoring these symptoms will not make them go away on their own and they may get worse over time. They can interfere with work, social activities, and relationships.

Menopause can also increase the severity of these symptoms, sometimes making it difficult to cope or manage. Help is available for incontinence which can be treated, better managed and even cured. Call the National Continence Helpline on **1800 33 00 66** and speak to a nurse continence specialist for advice and information about your bladder and bowel control.

If you feel anxious or depressed, and find you are not managing your symptoms well, ask for help. Go to jeanhailes.org.au or call on **1800 JEAN HAILES**.

How does menopause affect bladder and bowel function?

There are several ways that menopause impacts bladder and bowel function. Most of the symptoms that menopause can cause are due to the fact that your body makes less oestrogen. Any other chronic health issues you may have, such as diabetes, can also worsen bladder and bowel symptoms.

Weak pelvic floor muscles

When a woman goes through menopause, her pelvic floor muscles, like most muscles in the body, usually become weaker. As the pelvic floor muscles support both the bladder and bowel, any weakness may mean you have less control of these areas. This may also lead to prolapse, where your pelvic organs, that is your bladder, bowel and uterus (womb), drop down. Regular pelvic floor muscle exercises can help to prevent and improve this.

Less flexible bladder

After menopause, the bladder becomes less flexible and does not stretch as easily. When the bladder fills with urine, this loss of stretch may irritate the bladder muscle, making it overactive. An overactive bladder causes you to pass urine more often and urgently.

Bladder retraining and pelvic floor muscle exercises may help you get back control.

Vaginal dryness

The drop in oestrogen during menopause can lead to the lining of the vagina becoming thinner, less flexible and producing less mucus. This causes vaginal dryness.

The urethra, the outlet tube for the bladder, also undergoes similar changes. In the urethra, the dryness may allow bacteria to move in, increasing the risk of urinary tract infections. Needing to wear pads may also increase this risk. Personal hygiene (keeping clean) is very important, as well as good bladder habits.

Sexual intercourse may be uncomfortable or even painful. Vaginal lubricants and moisturisers may help but your doctor may prescribe oestrogen cream or pessaries to manage your symptoms.

Weight gain

Many women find they begin to gain weight around the time of menopause. Weight gain may cause bladder and bowel control issues. As the pelvic floor muscles support most of your pelvic organs, any extra weight can put pressure on and weaken these muscles. It is recommended you keep your weight within a healthy range.



Hysterectomy

Women who have had a hysterectomy or prolapse repair surgery, may have difficulty controlling their bladder around menopause. Pelvic floor muscle exercises are recommended before and after surgery as part of your treatment plan.

Anal trauma or surgery

Women who have had the muscle around the anus (back passage) damaged during childbirth, may or may not have had bowel control difficulties after childbirth. This may become an issue later in life with the start of menopause.

The anal muscles (sphincters) may become a little weaker and the previous damage may mean they don't shut as tight. This leads to soiling or difficulty holding in flatus (wind).

An exercise program for pelvic floor muscles may be helpful.

What can I do?

- ⇒ Talk to your health professional, nurse continence specialist or pelvic health physiotherapist for advice on your condition and situation
- ⇒ Drink well – have plenty of fluid throughout the day. Water is the best choice, however, soup, yoghurt, milk on cereal and custard can also be counted as fluid. Alcohol and drinks containing caffeine (such as coffee, tea and cola) can irritate the bladder



- ⇒ Eat well – eat a variety of food from each food group, particularly plant foods with high fibre, such as wholegrains, vegetables, fruit and legumes (beans) and nuts and seeds
- ⇒ Be active – stay as active as you can and maintain a healthy weight. This helps your mobility and your bladder and bowel health. Try walking, strength training, stretching and balance exercises
- ⇒ Exercise your pelvic floor muscles daily to improve your bladder and bowel control. A pelvic health physiotherapist or a nurse continence specialist can help you identify these and ensure you are doing them correctly
- ⇒ Use water or non-soap washes to gently cleanse your vulva (opening to the vagina) and anal areas. Avoid using any specific vulval or vaginal washes or perfumed bath products
- ⇒ Go to the toilet only when you need to go. Do not go 'just in case' as this can reduce how much your bladder can hold.

More information and advice

- ⇒ Call the **National Continence Helpline** on **1800 33 00 66** and speak with a nurse continence specialist
- ⇒ The Continence Foundation of Australia is the national peak body for continence prevention, management, education, awareness, information and advocacy **Website** continence.org.au
- ⇒ The National Public Toilet Map shows the location of public and private toilet facilities across Australia **Website** toiletmap.gov.au
- ⇒ **pelvicfloorfirst.org.au** – for information about the pelvic floor muscles and guidelines on safe exercise
- ⇒ Jean Hailes for Women's Health has information on women's health and wellbeing.
Website jeanhailes.org.au
Phone 1800 JEAN HAILES (532 642)

Other fact sheets

- ⇒ Pelvic floor muscle exercises for women
- ⇒ 1 in 3 women who ever had a baby wet themselves
- ⇒ Healthy diet and bowels
- ⇒ Good bladder habits for everyone

Available from continence.org.au/get-help/resources

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the following in developing this guide:



Call the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66 (free call)

Speak with a nurse continence specialist for free and confidential advice on resources, details for local continence services, products and financial assistance.

For more information, you can also visit:

continence.org.au
toiletmap.gov.au
health.gov.au/bladder-bowel

This fact sheet is intended as a general overview only and is not a substitute for professional assessment and care.

