

## Functional Incontinence: Bladder & Bowel

### Continence Series Information leaflet 4

#### What is Functional Incontinence?

Functional incontinence occurs when:

- a person does not recognise the need to go to the toilet
- a person does not recognise where the toilet is
- a person does not get to the toilet in time

The urine loss may be large. Causes of functional incontinence include confusion, dementia, poor eyesight, poor mobility, poor dexterity, or unwillingness to toilet because of depression, anxiety or anger.

Environmental factors also contribute to functional incontinence, such as poor lighting, low chairs that are difficult to get out of, and toilets that are difficult to access. The problems become more profound when someone comes into hospital. It can become even more difficult, and indeed unpleasant, if the person loses control of the bladder or bowel and is incontinent. This is, unfortunately, not an easy problem to deal with, and nobody has the perfect answer.

Not all confused people become incontinent, so it should not be seen as inevitable. There is often a simple answer (such as treating a bladder infection). Of course, confused people can also become incontinent for any of the reasons that affect other people, such as constipation, weak muscles or in men, an enlarged prostate.

## Patient Information

Continence Service 0208 539 5522 Extension 5509

Whipps Cross Road, Leytonstone, London, E11 1NR [www.whippsx.nhs.uk](http://www.whippsx.nhs.uk)

## **Help and advice**

The following are some practical suggestions that may help improve or avoid incontinence for some people.

1. Confused people benefit from frequent reminders of reality. It is important to talk to them a lot. Use their name often and talk about everyday things. For example the day, date or time of day, the season or weather, the place, Christmas is coming etc. Likewise, prompting confused people about their toilet habits can also be useful.
2. If a confused person is to remember new information, it will have to be repeated, in the same form, over and over again. They often function best with a fairly rigid routine – life will need to be as regular as possible and so try to avoid too many changes (e.g. moving the furniture around). Continence can be especially difficult in strange surroundings.
3. The person may simply forget to go to the lavatory - either not noticing that the bladder is full, or not realising that something needs to be done about it. Even when constipated patients take laxative tablets the problem is not solved because they do not experience the “call to stool” (the awareness that they need to go to the toilet).

Some people need frequent reminders to visit the lavatory. Others benefit from a regular habit - such as always going before or after meals. If meals and drinks are taken at roughly the same time each day, the bladder is likely to need emptying in a predictable pattern. Keeping a record for several days may enable these times to be anticipated.

Some confused people will become restless when their bladder is nearly full - they know that something has to be done but are not sure how or where to do it. Watching out for these signs and using them in arranging the time of toileting is helpful.

Bowel habit doesn't change throughout life and it is possible to take advantage of the natural reflex that occurs after eating, particularly after breakfast.

Taking a person to the toilet then can be very helpful. If it is found that a person is often wet at about 11.00 am, then a visit to the lavatory at 10.30 am may prevent this.

4. Someone who starts off to go to the lavatory may forget where they were going on the way. If the person cannot read, please inform staff and we can use a picture of a lavatory on the outside of the door, which may help them to go into the lavatory.

5. Confused people often will not tolerate discomfort very well. The lavatory needs to be comfortable, warm, well lit, and with the pedestal at the right height. If it is too high, a block under the feet can make it more comfortable; if too low, raised seats are available.

A hand rail beside the lavatory may reassure a person who is unsteady and afraid of falling. Sometimes someone will not pass urine even when sat on the lavatory - running a tap to give the idea may help. If they need to sit for longer, a magazine may distract them and keep them sitting for a while.

6. Continence is often closely related to an individual's level of functioning. The more active and involved they are the less likely incontinence becomes.

Someone who is depressed and isolated may have no reason to try to be dry. Nice clothes, appearance and surroundings encourage the person to take more care and make the effort to be dry. Clothes should also be easy to manage for toileting - e.g. Velcro fastenings may be easier than zips or buttons.

7. It is important to keep up a reasonable fluid intake. Older people tend to produce proportionately more urine at night, often having to get up several times, and they may take to wandering about in the dark looking for a lavatory. A commode or bottle by the bed may prevent this. At home a low voltage night-light may help prevent falls. It is sometimes a good idea to restrict drinks to two hours before sleep.

8. Local health and social services may offer a variety of forms of help. These may include the district nurse, continence advisor, health visitor, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, social worker, day centres, day hospitals and respite-care. Financial help such as attendance allowance may be available if a person needs regular help - ask your social services for details.

Some voluntary organisations may also give help locally, e.g. Age Concern. Incontinence products are available free of charge via district nursing services.

## Where can I get more information?

Whipps Cross Continence Service	0208 539 5522	Extension 5509
Waltham Forest Continence Service	0208 430 8258	
Redbridge Continence Service	0208 822 3871	
Newham Continence Service	0208 475 2011	
West Essex Continence Service	01279 698901	
Bladder and Bowel Foundation	01536 533255	
<a href="http://www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org">www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org</a>		

Age Concern

[www.ageconcernwf.org.uk](http://www.ageconcernwf.org.uk)

Waltham Forest Older People's Collaborative

[www.wfolderpeople.com](http://www.wfolderpeople.com)