

Preventing life's little spills

National Continence Awareness Week 2008 (August 3-9) will focus on mothers and children. For children the issue of bedwetting will be the major area of attention, while for mothers, the emphasis is on the importance of pelvic floor exercises.

Incontinence is the term given to the loss of voluntary control over bladder or bowel function; and it's one of the biggest health issues in the Australian community – affecting nearly four million people. It may not be life threatening, but incontinence can significantly impact on quality of life and is sometimes a sign of more serious health problems.

Signs of poor or weak bladder and loss of urine control include: frequency – wanting to go to the toilet frequently; nocturia – waking up to go to the toilet more than twice at night; urgency – sudden urges to go to the toilet; and the involuntary or unintentional loss of urine from the bladder – that is wetting pants or wetting the bed.

Of course continence problems are not confined to women and children. While studies show that women are many times more likely to be affected by incontinence than men, men are far less likely to do anything about it.

Incontinence in men is largely related to prostate problems. Simple age-related prostate gland enlargement is often the cause and a recent study found that 60% of men are affected by incontinence following surgery for prostate cancer. As well, medical conditions such as diabetes, obesity, constipation and chronic cough can cause or aggravate continence problems. Any bladder and bowel symptoms should be treated along with the underlying condition.

As we get older incontinence certainly becomes more prevalent and more severe; but incontinence is not just part of the ageing process. Certainly some age-related conditions increase the risk – conditions such as stroke, dementia, Parkinson's disease or simply impaired mobility. And more than half of all residents in nursing homes – both men and women – have bladder control problems.

Nevertheless, poor bladder and urine control can happen to anyone at any age; and other factors which increase risk are menopause, pregnancy, childbirth, having borne children, being overweight, and urinary tract infections.

Unfortunately, less than 40% of people with incontinence ever seek professional help. Perhaps because they're too embarrassed or too busy; or maybe they think nothing can be done; that it's just a side effect of getting older or having children.

If you, or someone in your family, are affected, firstly get some good advice. Don't let incontinence disturb your sleep or, worse still, ruin your social life. Talk to your doctor, your physiotherapist, your pharmacist or your nurse continence advisor.

There is excellent advice on the Continence Foundation website at www.continence.org.au or simply call into your local Self Care pharmacy for information on how to prevent and manage life's little spills.

Pharmacists throughout Australia who provide the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information, are promoting continence management. There are "fact cards" on *Bladder and Urine Control*, *Pelvic Floor Exercises*, *Prostate Problems* and *Urinary Tract Infection*; all with self-help hints and great advice on how to best manage continence problems, whatever the cause.

Remember, incontinence is a symptom, not a disease. It's important, therefore, to find out what is causing this symptom. As there are several different forms of incontinence, each responding to a different form of treatment.

Medications are sometimes used to help manage incontinence; but on the other hand certain medications (and the socially acceptable drugs like alcohol and caffeine) can cause incontinence or make it worse.

So if you have bladder problems, don't keep it a secret. Talk to your doctor or check out the information at one of the more than 2000 Self Care Pharmacies around Australia. Call 1300 369 772 for the nearest location.

Meanwhile, reduce your consumption of caffeine containing drinks – coffee, tea and cola; limit your alcohol intake; maintain a healthy weight; drink about two litres of water each day (unless otherwise advised by your doctor); eat plenty of fruit, vegetables and grains; exercise those muscles on the pelvic floor; and don't smoke.