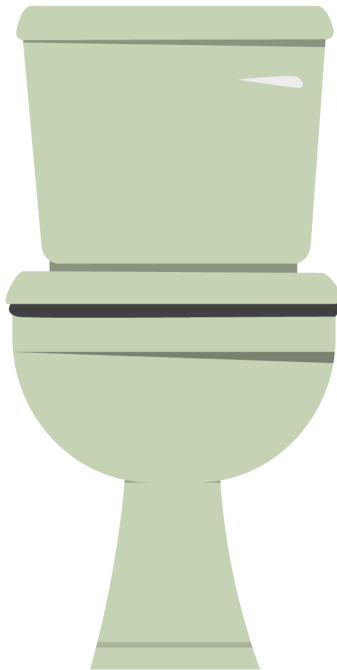


# Bladder and bowel problems



**Common problems and  
how to manage them**

# Who we are

**Age Scotland is the national charity for older people. We work to improve the lives of everyone over the age of 50 so that they can love later life.**

**Our vision** is a Scotland which is the best place in the world to grow older.

**Our mission** is to inspire, involve and empower older people in Scotland, and influence others, so that people can make the most of later life.

**Our three strategic aims** are to:



**Help older people to be as well as they can be**



**Promote a positive view of ageing and later life**



**Tackle loneliness and isolation**

# How we can help

**We know that growing older doesn't come with a manual. Later life can bring changes and opportunities to your life and you may need to know about rights, organisations and services which are unfamiliar to you.**

That's why we provide free information and advice to help you on a range of topics including benefits and entitlements, social care, legal issues such as Power of Attorney, housing and much more. All of our guides are available to download for free from our website, or you can contact our helpline team to have copies posted to you for free.

The Age Scotland **helpline** is a free, confidential phone service for older people, their carers and families in Scotland looking for information and advice.

Later life can bring times when you just need someone to talk to. Our **friendship line** is part of our wider helpline and older people can call us for a chat. We're here to listen, provide friendship and offer support.

## For information, advice and friendship



**Call us free on: 0800 12 44 222**  
**(Monday – Friday, 9am - 5pm)**



**Visit [agescotland.org.uk](https://www.agescotland.org.uk)**  
**to find out more.**



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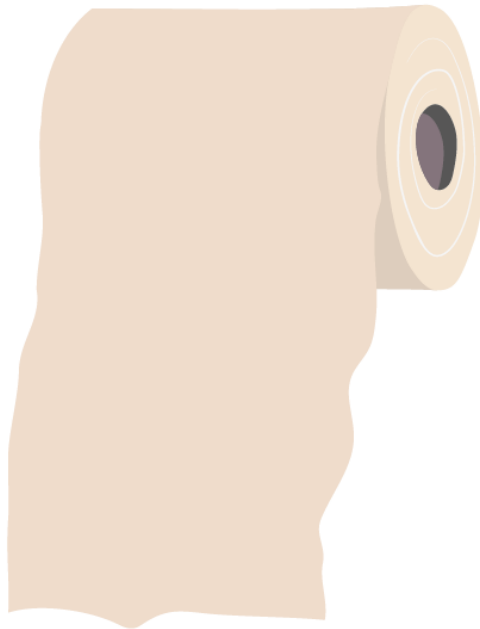


# What this guide is about

People of all ages can have a problem controlling their bladder or bowel. As people get older this may become more of an issue and it can really affect their day-to-day lives.

Bladder and bowel problems are not always easy to speak about; many people do not talk about what is happening to them or ask for help. They may think nothing can be done, or find it an embarrassing topic to talk about, but a GP or nurse can do a lot to help.

This guide looks at common problems, and some of the things you can do to cure, treat, or manage them so they do not interfere with your everyday life. Throughout the guide we use the terms 'pee' and 'poo'.





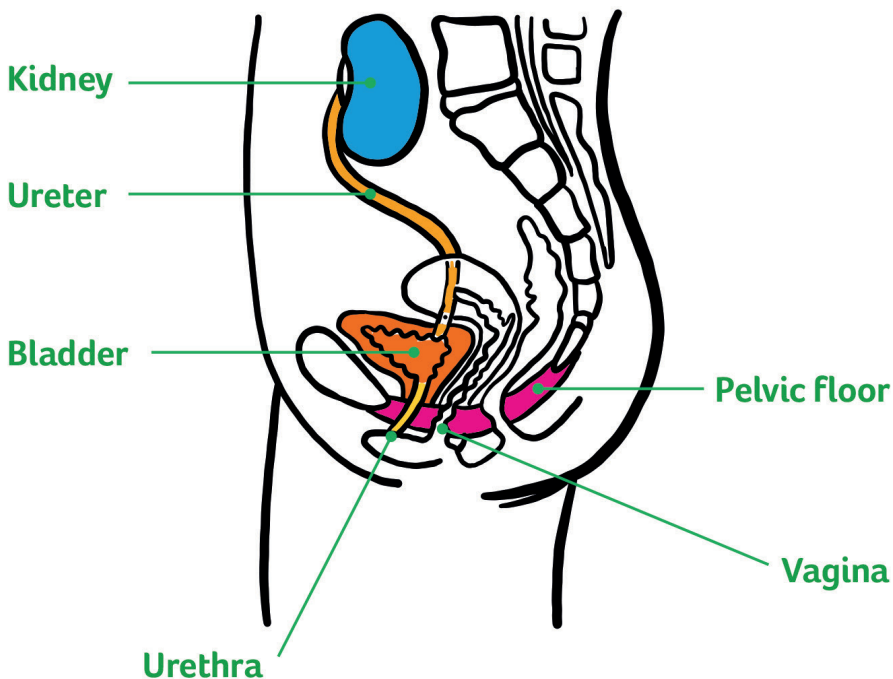
# The bladder

## How the bladder works

The bladder is a muscular bag in your lower body, supported by pelvic floor muscles, which fills and empties a few times each day. Urine (pee) is made in your kidneys and passes down ureters (tubes) to be stored in your bladder, which expands like a balloon until you empty it.

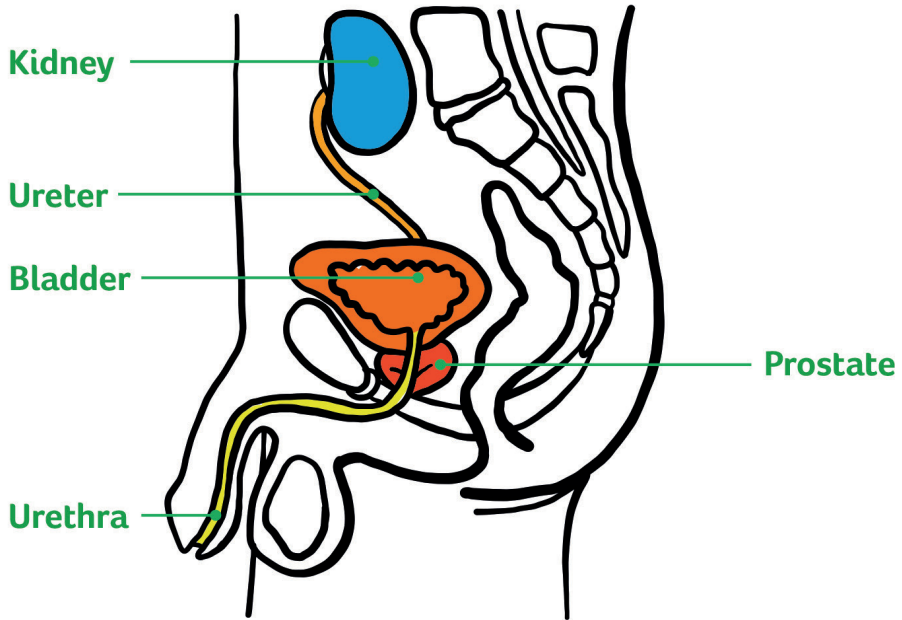
When you go to the toilet the bladder contracts, the tube called the urethra relaxes, and you pee. Your brain controls your bladder, automatically sending messages telling it when to hold on and when to empty.

## The female urinary system





## The male urinary system



### A normal bladder:

- empties four to seven times each day (every three to four hours)
- can hold up to a pint of urine (between 400ml and 600ml), but usually feels quite full at about half this amount
- may wake you up once at night to pee
- tells you when it's full but gives you time to find a toilet
- empties completely each time you pass urine
- does not accidentally leak urine.



## **Types of bladder problems**

Urinary incontinence is a loss of bladder control, when you sometimes pee unintentionally. It is estimated that 3.4 million people over 65 in the UK experience urinary incontinence, and it has many different causes.

### **Urinary tract infections (UTIs)**

If you have a UTI, like cystitis, you are likely to have a sudden urge to go to the toilet, go more often or feel a burning sensation when you do go. This can be painful and uncomfortable but symptoms should clear up by themselves after a few days. If you do not feel better after a few days, see your doctor or nurse.

### **Nocturia**

Nocturia is the need to get up to pee a lot during the night. If you are frequently up more than twice a night, and it is disturbing your sleep or making you tired in the daytime, speak to your doctor or district nurse.



## Stress incontinence

This is when you pee a little when you cough, sneeze, laugh or exercise – sometimes even gentle exercise like walking. It is caused by a weak bladder outlet and weakness of the pelvic floor muscles that support it. These muscles can also be strained if you are overweight.

Men may develop stress incontinence after a prostate operation. However, stress incontinence is more common in women because the pelvic floor muscles, which support the bladder, uterus and large bowel, can be stretched and weakened during childbirth. This can lead to a prolapse (when weakened pelvic floor muscles cause these organs to slip). After the menopause, the body stops producing the hormones that help keep the vagina and bladder outlet healthy.

## Urge incontinence

This is where you need the toilet so suddenly and urgently that it is difficult to get there in time. You may also need to go more often than usual and this may wake you several times at night.

Urge incontinence is caused by an overactive bladder. Many people find that as they get older, their bladder gives less warning and needs emptying more often. If your bladder starts to affect your everyday life or causes incontinence, it is time to get help.

The reason for an overactive bladder is often unknown. Sometimes it happens after a stroke, and it can also be linked to a condition such as Parkinson's, that affects the nerves linked to the bladder.



## Urinary retention

This can happen when the bladder does not empty completely. Urine builds up and may overflow, often as a frequent, dribbling leak. You may feel your stream of wee is weaker than before, have difficulty starting to pee or feel your bladder does not empty completely.

There are a number of reasons the bladder may not empty completely:

- a blockage or obstruction, like an enlarged prostate gland in men
- if you are severely constipated, your bowel may become too full and press on your bladder, reducing the amount it can hold or creating a need to pass urine
- bowel surgery or an injury to your spine may have damaged nerves to your bladder.

## Bladder problems in men

In men over 50, bladder problems can be a sign of an underlying prostate problem. If you notice changes, such as a weaker flow of urine or needing to get up at night to pee, or if you are worried about your risk of prostate cancer, visit your doctor. If you notice any blood in your urine, or feel pain when you pee, see your doctor as soon as you can.



# The bowel

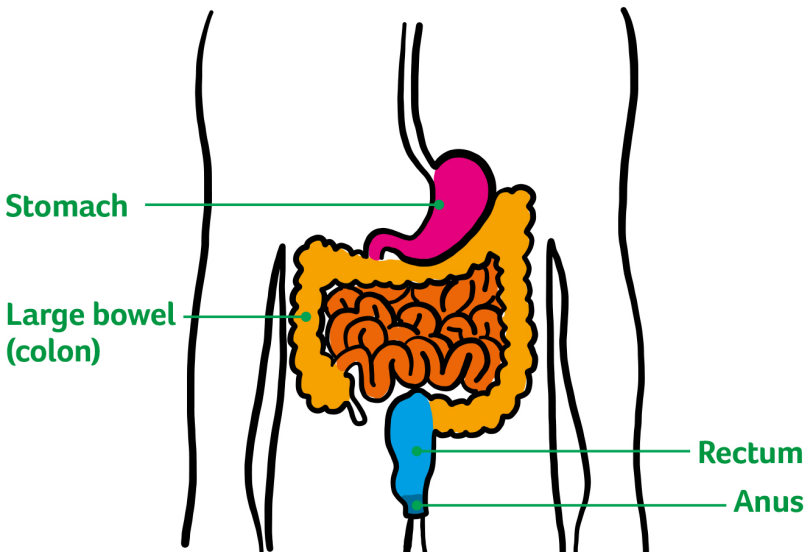
## How the bowel works

Food passes from the stomach into the upper part of the bowel. It then passes along the large bowel where fluid is absorbed and the remains of undigested food become poo. When this arrives in the rectum it creates that feeling of fullness we experience when we need to go to the toilet.

### A normal poo:

- is soft and easy to pass
- does not make you strain
- may come once a day, several times a day or only once every two to three days (all of these can be normal).

## Stomach





## Types of bowel problems

Most people get upset stomachs or constipation every now and again, but if this happens regularly or affects your daily life, make an appointment to see your doctor.

### Constipation

This is a common bowel problem and happens when particularly hard poo becomes difficult to pass.

Constipation may be caused by:

- not eating enough fibre (roughage which is found in foods such as wholemeal bread and cereals, fruit and vegetables)
- not drinking enough (you should drink at least six to eight cups of liquid a day)
- not being able to move around much
- certain medicines (such as some painkillers)
- not being able to get to a toilet or putting off going (so the feeling that you need to empty your bowel goes away)
- some neurological conditions, such as Parkinson's
- bowel diseases such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS).

Constipation or changes in bowel habits that continue for more than four weeks should always be discussed with your doctor. Report any bleeding to your doctor immediately.



## Diarrhoea

Diarrhoea is frequent, urgent, watery poos that can cause you to have an accident if you cannot get to the toilet in time. Diarrhoea has many causes, including the overuse of laxatives, bacterial or viral infection, or having Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) or other bowel diseases.

Diarrhoea that lasts for more than a few days, should always be discussed with your doctor. Report any bleeding to your doctor immediately.

## Bowel incontinence

This is when you cannot control your bowel movements, and some poo accidentally leaks out. Some people have this issue every day, others only occasionally. It is usually a symptom of an underlying medical condition that affects the bowel (for example, constipation, diarrhoea, multiple sclerosis, stroke).

Bowel incontinence can also be caused by muscle weakness or damage to the muscles that control the anus. Some women who experience muscle damage in childbirth can develop control problems later in life.



# Checking for bowel cancer

Bowel problems can happen at any age and are not usually a sign of a serious condition. However, bowel cancer is more common in older people so it is important to talk to your doctor if bowel problems continue for more than four weeks.

Bowel cancer symptoms can include blood in your poo, changes in your bowel habits and lower abdominal pain, bloating or discomfort.

You will be offered free NHS bowel screening every two years between the ages of 50 and 74. Once you are 50, you should automatically receive a letter about bowel screening and a test kit. The screening test can pick up signs of cancer before you experience any symptoms; this makes it more likely to be treated successfully.

**NHS Inform** can give you information about bowel cancer screening. You can contact them on **0800 22 44 88** or see their website **[www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot)**.

**Bowel Cancer UK** can provide information about bowel cancer; see their website **[www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk](http://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk)**.



# Professional help

## Getting professional help

Bladder and bowel problems are not a normal part of getting older. You do not have to put up with them, as there are lots of ways to treat bladder and bowel problems.

Talk about what is happening with your doctor or nurse, or the person admitting you to, or discharging you from, hospital. They will ask questions about your symptoms and may need to examine you. They may suggest treatment or exercises to tackle the problem, or ways to minimise its effect on your everyday life.

There may be a local bladder and bowel service; in some areas you can refer yourself, in others you will be referred by a doctor or nurse. A health professional may want to refer you to a hospital specialist, who can carry out tests to help diagnose your problem.



## What will a health professional need to know?

A health professional will need to ask you some questions to help them understand how your bladder or bowel is working. You may be asked for a urine sample, or your bladder may be tested to see how full it gets before the urge to go to the toilet begins.

You may be asked to keep a diary of your experiences of bladder or bowel problems before your appointment to help you explain what is happening to you.

You may be asked:

- when your bladder or bowel problems started
- if you leak, how often does it happen; does anything in particular trigger the leaks?
- how urgent your need to pee or poo is, and whether you can get to the toilet in time
- how much pee or poo you leak
- how you are dealing with your problems
- how much, what and when you are eating and drinking
- how many times you use the toilet each day and night
- what time you go to bed and get up in the morning
- whether you can you feel when your bladder or bowel is full
- whether you have had any other symptoms, such as pain, bleeding or discomfort
- what medicines (including over-the-counter or herbal) you are taking





## Treatments for bladder and bowel problems

The solutions your doctor or other health professionals suggest will depend on the type of problem you have. What works will vary from person to person, and sometimes more than one treatment will be needed. There are some common types of treatment described below.

### Pelvic floor exercises

These could help with stress incontinence and urge incontinence by strengthening the muscles around the bladder or bowel. A specialist continence nurse or continence physiotherapist can help you get the hang of these exercises.

### Bladder or bowel training

Bladder training involves learning techniques to hold urine for longer so that you use the toilet less often and gain control of your bladder. These can work for people with urge incontinence.

Bowel training from a healthcare professional involves establishing a regular time to poo, and stimulating your bowels to empty themselves.

### Medicines

Medicines are available for different types of bladder and bowel problems. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about what might help your problem and any side effects there may be. Often, medicine is prescribed alongside exercise or dietary change recommendations.

### Surgery

For some people, surgery may be an option if other treatments have not worked. Your consultant or doctor will talk to you about the benefits and possible risks associated with surgery.



# What can I do to help myself?

You should talk about any bladder or bowel problems with your doctor or nurse, but there are also things you can do to reduce the impact on your daily life:

- make sure you always fully empty your bladder when you go. Sitting for a few minutes, rocking from side to side or standing up and sitting down again can help
- if you are struggling with nocturia – the need to get up more than twice during the night – try drinking less in the few hours before you go to sleep
- tea, coffee or fizzy drinks can make your bladder symptoms worse - cut down on these drinks or try decaffeinated or still versions
- alcoholic drinks or drinks with artificial sweeteners may cause problems: pay attention to what you are drinking and you'll soon notice which ones affect you
- stopping smoking will cut your risk of bladder cancer, and also reduce coughing which can put pressure on your pelvic floor muscles
- maintain a healthy weight; being overweight puts pressure on, and can weaken, your pelvic floor muscles
- avoid constipation by eating plenty of fibre-rich foods, drinking plenty of liquid and moving or exercising regularly
- stay as active and mobile as you can to help keep your bowel healthy. For tips on staying active see our **Health and wellbeing in later life** guide
- ask your pharmacist or doctor whether any medicines that you are taking could be disturbing your bladder or bowel. For example, water tablets (diuretics) make it fill more often.



# Dealing with practical problems

Your bladder or bowel problems may be practical rather than medical. These could include walking difficulties that make it hard to reach the toilet in time and stiff fingers that struggle with zips and buttons. This could cause leaks to be a problem if you need the toilet urgently. This is sometimes called ‘functional’ incontinence.

If this is happening to you, there are some practical things you can do.

## Improve access to the toilet

If your incontinence is caused by difficulty getting around, a walking aid or stairlift may help you to get to the toilet in time.

Grab rails may make it easier to get on and off the toilet. These can be freestanding or attached to the wall. Adding a raised seat to the toilet may make it easier to sit down if you have joint problems.

It is important to have your needs properly assessed rather than buying what you think might help; contact your local council for an assessment of your care needs. See the section on **Support from your local council** for information about how they can help.



## Toilet queues

The **Bladder and Bowel Community** offers a free ‘Just Can’t Wait’ toilet card, so you do not have to queue if you are out and need to use a toilet quickly.

You can order one from the Bladder and Bowel Community through their website **[www.bladderandbowel.org](http://www.bladderandbowel.org)**. The card states clearly that the holder has a medical condition which means they may need to use the toilet urgently.

You can also get a **Radar key**, for disabled public toilets that have been fitted with a National Key Scheme (NKS) lock. These toilets are often found in shopping centres, pubs, cafés and railway stations. You can order one through **Disability Rights UK**; call them on **020 7250 8181** or see their website **[www.disabilityrightsuk.org](http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org)**.

**Disability Information Scotland** has information about where you can buy a Radar key locally. Call **0300 323 996** or see their website **[www.disabilityscot.org.uk](http://www.disabilityscot.org.uk)**.

## Alternatives to the toilet

If you cannot reach the toilet easily, a commode may be useful. These are available in a variety of designs; many have a lid and look like an ordinary chair. You can also get handheld urinals, for men and women, which can be used in bed or sitting in a chair or car.

For more advice on specialist equipment, speak to your district nurse or continence adviser, contact the **Disabled Living Foundation** on **0300 999 0004** or see their website **[www.dlf.org.uk](http://www.dlf.org.uk)**.

You can also see products that may help on the **Continence Product Advisor** website **[www.continenceproductadvisor.org](http://www.continenceproductadvisor.org)**.

## Out and about

Try not to let having a bladder or bowel problem stop you going out. There are practical solutions to problems that might arise. Take spare pads and pants out with you. Scented bags for soiled pants or pads are useful if you are worried about smell.

## Clothing

Many women find trousers, stockings or socks easier to manage than tights, and full skirts easier to get out of the way than tight ones. Men may find loose boxer shorts easier to manage than Y-fronts. Try clothing with elasticated waists, or adapt clothes so that they fasten with Velcro instead of zips and buttons.

## Travel

If you are going on a long journey with family or friends and know you will need to use the toilet frequently, let them know beforehand. That way, you can plan extra stops so you will not have to worry.





## Continence products

Your doctor should always explore all the options for your bladder or bowel problems with you, and there are usually treatments that can help, but they do not always stop incontinence completely. The right products should help you to manage the problem and reduce the impact on your day-to-day life.

Your local NHS continence service clinic is staffed by specialist nurses who can offer useful advice about incontinence, and let you know if there are any continence products you are entitled to free of charge.

There are a variety of pads, pants and other products but not all are available through the NHS:

- washable products such as re-usable pads, which often come as part of a pair of pants
- disposable pads held in place by close-fitting pants
- disposable pants, or all-in-one pads with plastic backing and adhesive patches to seal the sides. They are generally more suitable for heavy incontinence
- a bed or chair protector in the form of disposable or washable pads.
- products that fit over the penis and collect urine into a bag strapped to the leg. A 'penile sheath' is the most popular version of this and is available on prescription. There are also dribble pouches for lighter incontinence.

You can buy many continence products in pharmacies and supermarkets but speak to your doctor or nurse before using them permanently. The price of continence products varies, so shop around. Shops will not charge you VAT on continence products, but if you are buying online or by mail order, you may need to fill out a VAT exemption form.



## Personal hygiene and comfort

### Avoiding smell

Fresh urine should not smell unpleasant unless there is an infection. Urine might start to smell if exposed to the air for long periods. Good quality pads help absorb some smell. Wet clothes or sheets should be washed as soon as possible - keep them in a bucket with a lid until they are washed. Mop up any spills as quickly as you can.

The smell from bowel incontinence is more difficult to hide. Change soiled pads as soon as possible and put them into an airtight container or sealed bag. You might want to use odour control and air freshener products.

### Skin care

A balanced diet and plenty of fluids can help to protect your skin.

Washing regularly and drying yourself carefully with a soft towel helps to keep skin healthy, and you should change pads as regularly as you are advised to. A health professional may recommend you use a barrier cream to protect your skin.

If your skin becomes red or sore, make sure that any pad or appliance fits properly and is not rubbing. Some people develop an allergy to something, for example a washing powder or cream, or part of a pad. If your skin becomes broken, consult your district nurse or doctor immediately as this can lead to a skin infection.



## Support from your local council

If you are having difficulty getting to or using the toilet at home, speak with your local council's social work department. They will carry out a care needs assessment and if you meet local eligibility criteria, they can provide items such as handrails in the bathroom or a commode.

If you need support from carers to live at home, you may need their help with your bladder and bowel or toileting needs. If carers are not providing the support you need, ask for your care plan to be looked at again or speak to the manager responsible for your care.

Our guides **Care and support at home: assessment and funding** and **Care and support at home: practical help** explain how your care needs are assessed, what types of support and equipment may be available and how much you may need to pay towards your care costs.

If you already have bladder and bowel problems when you are admitted to hospital or develop new problems while there, they should be identified during your discharge assessment. The staff should make sure these are addressed in your care plan and discharge plan, and send a copy to your doctor. For information about hospital discharge see our **Hospital discharge** guide.





# Benefits and social security

If you have a physical, mental or cognitive disability or health condition, and need supervision or help with personal care, you might be eligible for Attendance Allowance (AA) if you are over State Pension age or Adult Disability Payment (ADP) if you are under State Pension age. These are non-means tested benefits, so you can claim them regardless of your income or savings.

For more information call the **Age Scotland** helpline on **0800 12 44 222** or **Social Security Scotland** on **0800 182 2222**.

You will not necessarily qualify for these benefits because of continence issues, but you may be eligible if you need help with things like getting to and from the toilet, using the toilet, being reminded to go or changing your continence pads.

For advice about benefits call the **Age Scotland** helpline on **0800 12 44 222** or our guides **Benefits Maze**, **Attendance Allowance**, **Adult Disability Payment** and **Benefits and Dementia**.



# Dementia and incontinence

Someone who is living with dementia may forget to visit the toilet, or be unable to tell people when they need to go. They may not notice physical signs that they need the toilet, not remember the way to the toilet, or not recognise it when they get there.

They might need regular, gentle reminders. If the person you are caring for forgets where the toilet is, a notice or picture on the door might help. A regular routine can also help, or you may need to learn to recognise signs they need the toilet, and discreetly encourage them to go at these times.

Age Scotland's **Creating an enabling home for someone with dementia** guide has suggestions for making your bathroom more accessible for someone living with dementia.

If you are having difficulties, talk to your doctor, district nurse or local continence clinic.

**Alzheimer Scotland** can provide expert advice about dementia. You can call their helpline on **0808 808 3000** or see their website **[www.alzscot.org](http://www.alzscot.org)**.

# Useful organisations

## Age Scotland helpline: 0800 12 44 222

The Age Scotland helpline provides information, friendship and advice to older people, their relatives and carers. If you need an interpreter call **0800 12 44 222** and simply state the language you need e.g. Polish or Urdu. Stay on the line for a few minutes and the Age Scotland helpline will do the rest.

You can call us for a copy of our publications list or download / order copies from our website at **[www.agescotland.org.uk](http://www.agescotland.org.uk)**.

You can find more detailed information about health issues in Age Scotland's other health related guides including:

### **HWB1 Eat Well**

### **HWB 4 Mental health, keeping well and who can help**

### **HWB 7 NHS services for older people**

### **HWB 10 Your Hospital stay**

## Bladder and Bowel UK

Part of Disabled Living UK, the charity provides information, support and free confidential advice to anyone with bladder and bowel issues and the professionals who support them.

Helpline: **0161 214 4591**

**[www.bbuk.org.uk](http://www.bbuk.org.uk)**

## Bowel Cancer UK

A support charity for everyone affected by bowel cancer.

Tel: **020 7940 1760**

**[www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk](http://www.bowelcanceruk.org.uk)**



## Bladder and Bowel Community

Provides a range of information and resources for people with bladder and bowel problems.

**[www.bladderandbowel.org](http://www.bladderandbowel.org)**

## Continence Product Advisor

Website offering independent advice about continence products.

**[www.continenceproductadvisor.org](http://www.continenceproductadvisor.org)**

## Disability information Scotland

Provides information guides and a directory of support in Scotland.

Tel: **0300 323 996**

**[www.disabilityscot.org.uk](http://www.disabilityscot.org.uk)**

## Disability Rights UK

Operates a National Key Scheme that offers people with disabilities independent access to around 7,000 locked public toilets nationwide.

**[www.disabilityrightsuk.org](http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org)**

## Disabled Living Foundation

Helps older and disabled people live independently at home and provides advice on equipment such as commodes and urinals.

Tel: **0300 999 0004**

**[www.dlf.org.uk](http://www.dlf.org.uk)**

## NHS Inform

Provides information about health conditions and rights

Tel: **0800 22 44 88**

**[www.nhsinform.scot](http://www.nhsinform.scot)**

## Disclaimer

While we aim to ensure that the information in this document is factually correct at the time of production, Age Scotland cannot be held liable for any errors or omissions. Please ensure that you have an up to date guide and that it clearly applies to your situation.

No leaflet can ever be a complete guide to the law, which also changes from time to time. Legal advice should always be taken if you are in doubt.

Please note that the inclusion of named agencies, companies, products, services or publications in this guide does not constitute a recommendation or endorsement by Age Scotland.

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# How you can help

## Our vision is a Scotland which is the best place in the world to grow older.

All the information and advice we provide is free and completely impartial and in helping people access their rights and entitlements, it can be life changing.

We are an ageing population and more people than ever are coming to us for support. You can help us be there for those that need us most.



### Make a donation

No matter how small or large, donations make a massive difference and help us continue our important work.

- ▶ Call **03330 15 14 60**
- ▶ Visit **age.scot/donate**
- ▶ Text **LATERLIFE** to **70085** to donate £5.\*



### Fundraise

Whether it is having a bake sale, running a marathon or knitting small hats for the Big Knit, there are so many ways to raise vital funds to support our work. To find out more, call **0333 323 2400** or visit **age.scot/fundraise**.



### Leave us a gift in your Will

By choosing to leave us a gift in your Will, you can help Age Scotland to continue being there for vulnerable older people in the years to come. To find out more, call **0333 323 2400** or visit **age.scot/legacy**.

\* Texts cost £5 plus one standard rate message

# Let's keep in touch



## Sign up to our newsletter

Our regular newsletters by email contain details of our campaigns, services and how you can support our work.

Sign up today by visiting **[age.scot/roundup](https://age.scot/roundup)**



## Follow us on social media

Our social media channels are a great way to keep up to date with our work and issues that affect older people.



**[/agescotland](https://www.facebook.com/agescotland)**



**[@AgeScotland](https://twitter.com/AgeScotland)**



**[@age\\_scotland](https://www.instagram.com/age_scotland)**



**[/AgeScotland](https://www.linkedin.com/company/AgeScotland)**

**Age Scotland is the national charity for older people. We work to improve the lives of everyone over the age of 50 so that they can love later life.**

**Our vision is a Scotland which is the best place in the world to grow older.**

**Contact us:**

**Head office**

0333 323 2400

**Age Scotland helpline**

0800 12 44 222

**Email**

info@agescotland.org.uk

**Visit our website**

www.agescotland.org.uk

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