



# Bowel Incontinence

## What is bowel incontinence?

Bowel incontinence refers to a loss of control of your bowels, which can cause accidental leakage of stool or gas. It can be caused by weak pelvic floor muscles from surgery, other trauma that causes muscle injury (such as child birth), nerve damage or other medical conditions.

Fear, anxiety and anger are common feelings for people dealing with incontinence. You may find yourself avoiding intimacy or sex because you are afraid of gas or stool leakage. Fear of having an accident may also keep you from being physically active, enjoying hobbies or spending time outside your home.

Talking openly with your doctor about bowel incontinence can help them recommend treatments to improve your condition and quality of life.

Certain types of cancer or cancer treatments might increase your risk for bowel incontinence. Some possible causes may include:

- Anal, rectal or colon tumors
- Tumor pressure in the spine or near the bladder
- Weakening of the muscles that control the bowel
- Radiation to the pelvic, abdominal (belly), rectal or genital area

Some other causes may include:

- Surgery
- Constipation and/or diarrhea
- Stress
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Hemorrhoids
- Rectal prolapse (the rectum, part of the large intestine, protrudes through the anus, often because of weak pelvic muscles)
- Spinal cord injury or nervous system disorders like stroke, dementia, Parkinson’s disease or multiple sclerosis

## Signs and symptoms of bowel incontinence

Bowel incontinence might cause you to pass gas or stool without having felt a prior urge. You may experience leaking liquid stool or mucus, or might not be able to reach the toilet in time. Other bowel symptoms may include diarrhea, constipation or gas and bloating.

## How do you diagnosis bowel incontinence?

Your doctor will ask about your symptoms, medical history, medication and diet (alcohol or tobacco use, or if certain foods make your incontinence worse). Your doctor may order laboratory testing or perform a rectal exam. In women, a pelvic exam may be needed. You may also be referred to another doctor who specializes in stomach or colon disorders.

## Tips for talking with your doctor:

- Prepare for your visit by writing down how long you’ve had symptoms and what your symptoms are.

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- Write down questions for your doctor before your visit.

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- During the appointment, make sure to tell your doctor about all of your symptoms. Be open and honest about your symptoms, even if you feel embarrassed or shy. Remember, bowel incontinence is a medical problem.
- Ask your doctor questions if you don't understand what he or she is saying.
- Tell your doctor if you have concerns about your treatment.
- Call your doctor if your symptoms get worse.

## How do you prevent or treat bowel incontinence?

Depending on the cause, it may be possible to prevent bowel incontinence. The following tips may help:

- Reduce constipation by getting more exercise, eating more high-fiber foods and drinking plenty of fluids.
- Control diarrhea by treating or eliminating the cause of the diarrhea.
- Avoid straining during bowel movements.
- Practice pelvic floor exercises to encourage relaxation and strengthening of the muscles of the lower pelvis. (Typically, several months of pelvic floor therapy is needed to achieve satisfactory results.)
- Incontinence products: Certain products, such as pads worn under your clothing are available to help keep you active and comfortable. Adult briefs and undergarments are bulkier than pads but provide more protection. Bed pads or absorbent mattress covers can help protect bed linens and mattresses.

Many effective treatments can help people with bowel incontinence, including:

- Medication
- Surgery
- Dietary changes
- Minimally invasive procedures
- Bowel regimen
- Physical therapy
- Electrical stimulation devices

More than one treatment method may be needed to control the symptoms. It will take time and continued follow up with your doctor.

## Additional Resources

- Washington University Physicians: [wuphysicians.wustl.edu](http://wuphysicians.wustl.edu)
  - Female Pelvic Medicine and Reconstructive Pelvic Surgery
  - Gastroenterology
  - Physical Therapy
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases: [niddk.nih.gov](http://niddk.nih.gov)
- STAR (Sports Therapy and Rehabilitation) BJC HealthCare: [barnesjewishwestcounty.org/star](http://barnesjewishwestcounty.org/star)

*This handout is for informational purposes only. It should not be used in place of advice or instructions given by your doctor. Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have questions about your care.*

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