

Menopause and continence health



Menopause is a natural stage of life. During perimenopause and menopause some women may notice changes in their bladder, bowel, vaginal and pelvic floor health.

More than 1 in 2 women experience bladder, vaginal or vulval symptoms during menopause and perimenopause (the time leading up to menopause). These changes are known as Genitourinary Syndrome of Menopause (GSM) and can affect bladder function, vaginal and vulval comfort, sexual wellbeing and quality of life.

The good news is that many women can improve their symptoms and maintain their quality of life with the right advice and care.

Why do these changes happen?

Many of the changes that occur throughout menopause are related to lower hormone levels, particularly oestrogen.

Oestrogen helps to keep the bladder, urethra (wee tube), vagina, vulva and pelvic floor tissues healthy. As oestrogen levels fall throughout perimenopause and menopause, these tissues can become thinner, less elastic and more sensitive. This may lead to bladder, bowel, vaginal and pelvic floor symptoms.

Other factors can also affect the bladder, bowel and pelvic floor health. These include ageing, previous pregnancy and childbirth, pelvic surgery, constipation, coughing, and changes in your body such as increased fat around the abdomen (belly) and loss of muscle mass (size) and strength.

Changes you may notice

Bladder changes

- passing urine (wee) more often than usual (frequency)
- a sudden, strong need to pass urine or difficulty holding on (urgency)
- urine leakage when exercising, coughing or sneezing (stress urinary incontinence)
- waking frequently during the night to pass urine (nocturia)
- regular urinary tract infections (UTIs)

Needing to pass urine more often, rushing to the toilet, or finding it harder to hold on can become more common during the menopause transition and beyond. These symptoms are often referred to as an overactive bladder.

Bowel changes

- constipation – finding it hard to pass faeces (poo)
- finding it hard to control wind
- a sudden need to open your bowels (urgency)
- bowel leakage (faecal incontinence)

Vaginal and pelvic floor changes

- vaginal dryness, irritation or discomfort during intimacy
- a feeling of heaviness, dragging or bulging in the vaginal area (pelvic organ prolapse)
- changes in pelvic floor support, or bladder or bowel control

Not everyone experiences these changes, and symptoms can vary from person to person.

Looking after your pelvic health during menopause

Simple lifestyle changes can help with bladder, bowel and pelvic floor health, throughout perimenopause, menopause and beyond.

- stay physically active and include strength training and pelvic floor muscle training as part of your regular routine
- drink water throughout the day
- eat a variety of fibre-rich foods, including vegetables, fruit, wholegrains and legumes
- reduce caffeine and alcohol if they affect bladder symptoms
- avoid constipation and straining when going to the toilet
- respond to your bladder's natural signals rather than going to the toilet "just in case"

Support and treatment options

Pelvic floor muscle training

Regular pelvic floor muscle training can help improve bladder and bowel control, reduce urine leakage during activities such as exercise, coughing and sneezing, and support a pelvic organ prolapse.

A pelvic health physiotherapist can assess your pelvic floor muscles and develop a program that matches your symptoms, needs and goals. This may include exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor, improve muscle coordination, or help the muscles to relax when needed.

Bladder and bowel health

Healthy bladder and bowel habits may help to improve bladder control, bowel regularity and pelvic floor function.

Constipation and straining on the toilet can place extra pressure on the pelvic floor. Over time, this may contribute to bladder, bowel and prolapse symptoms.

Drinking enough fluids, eating a variety of fibre-rich foods, and staying active can keep your bowels regular. Sitting in a relaxed position on the toilet, with your knees slightly higher than your hips, may help reduce straining and improve comfort.



Vaginal oestrogen therapy

For women experiencing symptoms of **Genitourinary Syndrome of Menopause (GSM)**, vaginal oestrogen therapy can help improve:

- vaginal dryness and irritation
- discomfort during intimacy
- ongoing urinary tract infections (UTIs)
- urinary urgency
- urinary frequency.

Vaginal oestrogen is available as a cream, vaginal tablets or pessaries. It works locally on the tissues of the vagina, vulva and lower urinary tract. Many women notice improvements after several weeks of treatment.

This treatment is different from menopausal hormone therapy (MHT) which works throughout the body. MHT may not have the same direct effect on the bladder and urinary symptoms.

Speak with your health professional about whether vaginal oestrogen may be right for you.

Menopausal hormone therapy (MHT)

MHT is one of the most effective treatments for menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes and night sweats. By improving these symptoms, MHT may help to reduce sleep disruption, including the need to wake during the night to use the toilet, and may improve overall wellbeing.

Speak with your health professional about whether MHT may be suitable for you.

Pessaries

A pessary is a removable, reusable silicone device placed inside the vagina to help support pelvic organ prolapse. For some women, a pessary may help reduce feelings of vaginal heaviness, improve bladder control and make it easier to stay active and participate in everyday activities.

A pelvic health physiotherapist, nurse continence specialist, general practitioner (GP) or specialist doctor such as a gynaecologist can help to determine whether a pessary is suitable for you. They can provide advice about fitting and ongoing care.

Specialist support

GPs, specialist doctors, nurse continence specialists and pelvic health physiotherapists can provide assessment, treatment and personalised advice.

Seeking help early can help you understand your symptoms, explore treatment options and feel more confident managing your pelvic health throughout menopause and beyond.

More information and support

You do not have to manage these changes on your own. Support is available.

- **Call the National Continence Helpline** on **1800 33 00 66** to speak with a nurse continence specialist for free and confidential information and support
- **Visit Continence Health Australia** for bladder and bowel health information, continence resources and support continence.org.au
- **Find a nurse continence specialist, pelvic health physiotherapist or continence service** near you using the Continence Health Australia Service Provider Directory continence.org.au/help-and-support/find-a-service-provider/
- **Explore Pelvic Floor First** for practical pelvic floor health advice, helping women to stay active during perimenopause, menopause and beyond pelvicfloorfirst.org.au

- **Visit Jean Hailes for Women's Health** for trusted evidence-based information on menopause, women's health and wellbeing jeanhailes.org.au
- **Use the National Public Toilet Map** to find public toilets across Australia toiletmap.gov.au

Acknowledgment

This resource was developed by **Continence Health Australia** in collaboration with **Jean Hailes for Women's Health**.



Call the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66

Monday to Friday 8am – 8pm (AEST).
This may vary by state due to time zone differences. Closed on public holidays.

You can talk to a nurse continence specialist for free and confidential advice.
You can ask for an interpreter who speaks your language.

*Continence Health Australia recognises that the words we use can impact how people feel seen and heard and, in turn, how they engage in conversations about health. References to 'women' or 'girls' include all people who may have similar health needs, including people assigned female at birth and anyone who identifies as a woman.

Note: This resource is designed to support you with clear, helpful information. A health professional can provide care that's right for your needs.

© Continence Health Australia 2026 | RESENG288
