

CONTINENCE AIDS

In a waste management context

What is incontinence?

Incontinence is a term that describes any accidental or involuntary loss of urine from the bladder (urinary incontinence) or bowel motion, faeces or wind from the bowel (faecal or bowel incontinence).

Incontinence is a widespread condition that ranges in severity from 'just a small leak' to complete loss of bladder or bowel control. There are many types of incontinence. Management strategies will differ depending on the type and cause of incontinence and it is important it is managed with the right advice and support from health professionals.

What are continence aids?

Continence aids help manage the symptoms of poor bladder and bowel control. They may be used for a short time during treatment or long term if poor bladder or bowel control can't be cured. Continence products include absorbent pads and pants, bed pads and chair pads.

The problem

In Australia, a large percentage of continence products used today are disposable products (continence pads and underwear). The majority of continence products sold in Australia are disposable and are going to landfill after a single use.

Incontinence is a varied and complex condition that requires varying degrees of management. This fact sheet highlights reusable options suitable for some incontinence conditions and for those who are able to manage the laundering of reusable products. Caring for people with dignity in assisted-living or in home-based settings is complex and often requires specialised management and disposal.

Disposable aids are often made from plastics and synthetic materials that end up in landfill where they break down slowly, emitting methane, a harmful greenhouse gas. Disposable aids have dominated incontinence management, however with improved fibre technologies and an increased awareness around environmental effects of single use products, a growing range of reusable incontinence products have come to market.

Did you know...

- Australia's National Continence Foundation estimates that one in five Australians have some form of incontinence.

What are the options?

Disposable continence aids

There are many continence products on the market that can assist people with light to moderate incontinence to stay dry and comfortable.

Disposable continence products are typically made of cotton, plastics and other synthetic materials which are disposed of after a single use where they build up in landfill. These products are often imported and packaged in soft plastics which add to their associated waste and emissions. Most disposable products can be thrown away in normal household rubbish. Continence aids should never be flushed down the toilet.

There are a growing number of Australian suppliers who are dedicated to improving the environmental cost of these products by favouring renewable or natural materials and recycled and recyclable packaging.

Compostable continence aids

Compostable continence aids look and feel like disposables aids but are made from natural materials that will breakdown under the right conditions. They cannot be safely composted in home composting systems so like conventional disposables must be disposed in of in landfill.

Currently there are no commercial composting facilities in Canberra that can process compostable continence aids so while they may break down faster and with less plastic residues than a conventional disposables they will still produce methane as they break down.

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Washable mattress protector

Reusable continence aids

There is an increasing range of reusable continence products such as pads and pants on the market that may be a viable option for some people. They represent an alternative to using disposables and in some cases their similarity to traditional underpants makes them a discreet option. Made with fabrics such as bamboo, cotton and synthetics they are both absorbent and easily laundered. Like many reusable items, they have a higher upfront cost but their cost per use can be lower over the life of the product.

Other reusable products such as chair, couch and bedding covers can also assist to manage incontinence issues. People living in home-based environments have a greater potential for managing an individual's continence needs using reusable items.

Adopting reusable incontinence underwear and bed, couch and chair covers can reduce waste to

landfill however it requires increased washing and handling. There are settings where maintaining the dignity of the user and the capacity to manage increased laundering make reusable products challenging.



Washable pads for minor bladder leaks

Conclusion

The range of products currently on the market supports consumers and carers to make decisions depending on what can be practically managed for people living with incontinence in different living situations. Using a combination of quality reusable products and disposables may be a cost effective and economical way of managing some incontinence while reducing the associated waste of disposable products.

Waste is only one of the many challenges associated with incontinence... the social, financial, medical and productivity impacts of this frequently dismissed condition all contribute to the myriad of complexities affecting incontinence in our community.

Learn more...



[Australian Department of Health - Bladder and Bowel Website](#)



[Continence Foundation of Australia](#)



[National Continence Helpline](#)
1800 33 00 66



[Canberra Health Services - Continence](#)

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