HEALTH BASICS

Urinary incontinence products

Urinary incontinence products are aids that absorb or collect accidental urine leakage.

WHAT IT IS
Absorbent or collection aids for managing accidental urine leakage

WHERE IT COMES UP
Daily life with urinary leakage during assessment or treatment

WHY IT MATTERS
Protecting skin, clothing, sleep, comfort, and daily activity

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or treatment for underlying causes

WHO TO ASK
Continence nurse, primary care clinician, pharmacist, or pelvic health service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Fit, leakage control, skin condition, comfort, and user feedback

Overview

Urinary incontinence products help manage urine that leaks before you reach a toilet or without warning. They include absorbent pads and underwear, washable bed protection, external collection devices, and skin-protection products.

These products are not a diagnosis or a treatment for the cause of leakage. They can make daily activities, work, travel, exercise, and sleep easier while you have an assessment or receive treatment. They may also provide long-term support when treatment does not fully control leakage or is not suitable for you.

The best choice depends on how much urine leaks, when it happens, your body shape, skin health, mobility, hand function, and whether someone helps with personal care. A product that works well during the day may not be suitable overnight.

Urinary leakage is common enough that products are widely sold, but new or changing leakage still deserves medical attention. Causes can include urinary tract infection, constipation, medication effects, pelvic floor problems, an enlarged prostate, nerve conditions, or difficulty emptying the bladder.

How it works

Absorbent products draw urine away from the skin and hold it inside an absorbent layer. Options include small pads, guards designed for male anatomy, larger shaped pads, pull-up underwear, and briefs with side fasteners. Side-fastening products may be easier when changing in bed or when removing clothes is difficult.

Pads are usually held close to the body by fitted underwear or fixation pants. A pad that is too loose can move and leak. One that is too tight may rub the skin. Manufacturer absorbency ratings can help with comparison, but performance also depends on fit, movement, leakage speed, and body position.

Disposable or washable underpads protect mattresses, chairs, and other surfaces. They are usually backup protection rather than a substitute for a well-fitting body-worn product.

External collection products direct urine into a container instead of absorbing it. A urinary sheath, sometimes called an external or condom catheter, fits over the penis and connects to a drainage bag. Other external collection devices may sit around the vulva and use gentle suction in healthcare settings. Correct sizing and skin checks are important.

Penile clamps compress the urethra, the tube carrying urine out of the body. They are suitable only for selected people and should be chosen with clinical advice because excess pressure or prolonged use can injure skin and tissue.

An indwelling urinary catheter is a tube placed inside the bladder. It is not a routine incontinence product. Catheters have specific medical uses and can cause problems such as infection, blockage, bladder discomfort, or urethral injury.

Barrier creams or films can protect skin from repeated moisture. They do not replace changing a wet or soiled product and gently cleaning the skin.

Why it matters for your health

A suitable product can reduce wet clothing and bedding, support sleep, and make it easier to remain active. Reliable containment may also reduce worry about visible leaks or odour.

Skin health is an important part of product choice. Urine and sweat trapped against the skin can weaken its protective surface. Friction from a poor fit can add irritation. A product should keep the skin reasonably dry without causing pressure marks, rubbing, or heat buildup.

Products should support, rather than delay, assessment and treatment. Clinical guidance describes absorbent products as a way to cope with leakage while treatment is being considered, as an addition to treatment, or for longer-term management after appropriate

options have been explored.

Cost and access also matter. Public health services, insurance plans, and community supply schemes have different eligibility rules. Some provide an assessment before supplying products. A continence service can explain local arrangements and whether samples are available.

Environmental impact may affect your choice. Washable products create laundry, while disposable products create waste. Comfort, skin protection, independence, and reliable leakage control usually need to be considered alongside environmental concerns.

What can go wrong

A poor fit or insufficient absorbency can lead to leaks. Using several pads on top of each other may create gaps, bulk, and pressure rather than improving protection. A higher-capacity product or different shape may work better.

Prolonged moisture can cause incontinence-associated dermatitis , meaning inflamed skin linked to contact with urine or stool. The skin may become red or darker than usual, sore, itchy, broken, or weepy. Fungal infection can sometimes develop in warm, damp skin folds.

Adhesives, fragrances, cleansers, or product materials may cause contact dermatitis , which is skin irritation or an allergic reaction. Persistent rash, broken skin, discharge, or worsening pain needs clinical review.

External collection devices can leak, twist, or press on tissue. Seek prompt advice for swelling, marked redness, blistering, discolouration, or pain around a sheath or clamp. Do not continue using a device that restricts circulation.

A catheter can become blocked or contribute to a urinary tract infection. Fever, chills, pain in the side or back, confusion, or a catheter that stops draining needs prompt medical assessment.

Products can also hide a change in bladder health. Arrange routine follow-up for new leakage, a clear change in your usual pattern, pain when urinating, repeated urinary infections, trouble starting the urine stream, or a feeling that the bladder does not empty.

Seek urgent medical care if you suddenly cannot pass urine and have increasing lower abdominal pain or swelling. Seek emergency care for new loss of bladder control with numbness around the genitals or buttocks, severe back pain, or new leg weakness. These features can be linked to serious pressure on spinal nerves.

What you can do

Start by recording what happens over several typical days. Note when and roughly how much you drink, when you urinate, when leakage occurs, what you were doing, and which products leaked. This bladder diary can help a continence clinician understand your needs.

Check the product's sizing instructions and measure the area specified by the manufacturer, often the waist or hips. Ask for samples when possible. Test a product during the activities and positions that matter to you, including walking, sitting, lying down, and transferring between a bed and chair.

When comparing products, consider:

Change wet or soiled products as needed. Clean skin gently, avoid harsh rubbing, and pat it dry. A healthcare professional or pharmacist can suggest a barrier product if moisture is affecting your skin. Do not flush pads, underwear, wipes, or catheters down the toilet.

Ask a continence nurse or primary care clinician whether you need an assessment of the leakage itself. This may include a urine test, a bladder diary, a physical examination, or a bladder scan that checks how much urine remains after you urinate. There is no medical test that identifies one universally "best" product; comfort, skin condition, fit, and real-life performance are the main checks.

- The amount and speed of leakage
- Daytime and overnight needs
- Comfort, fit, and ease of changing
- Skin condition and sweating
- Mobility, hand strength, and access to a toilet
- Laundry, disposal, cost, and local supply arrangements

Common questions

Can I use menstrual pads for urine leakage?

Menstrual pads are designed mainly for menstrual blood, while incontinence pads are designed to take in urine and keep it away from the skin. A purpose-made incontinence product will usually provide more suitable containment.

Should I choose the most absorbent product available?

Not automatically. Extra absorbency can add bulk and heat. The aim is the lowest level that

reliably manages your leakage for the time between changes without harming comfort or skin.

Are washable products as effective as disposable ones?

Either may be useful. Performance depends on the design, fit, leakage amount, washing process, and how often the item is changed. Some people use washable products at home and disposable products when travelling.

Can products stop urinary incontinence?

No. They contain or collect urine but do not correct the underlying cause. Bladder training, pelvic floor therapy, medication, procedures, or other treatment may be appropriate after assessment.

Do I need a prescription?

Many pads and protective garments are sold without a prescription. External devices, clamps, and catheters are safer when selected and fitted with professional guidance. Funding or supply through a health service may require a continence assessment.

Sources