



# Check for Change UK and ROI



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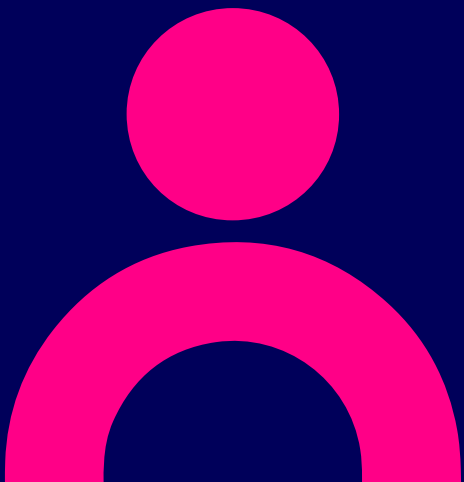


# 01

## Introduction

At our very core, Essity, its brands, and products are committed to breaking barriers to wellbeing. We work with our industry partners to innovate and deliver sector leading solutions to help improve the quality of our customers' lives.

Our 'Check for Change' campaign is designed to encourage us all to look out for changes in our regular genitourinary, reproductive and bowel wellbeing, which for the purposes of this report, we've referred to in places as 'bathroom health'. This is to recognise that – whilst not exclusively – too often changes to our genitourinary, reproductive and bowel health will be first noticed behind the closed door of a bathroom and ignored due to societal stigma. We want to encourage anyone who experiences something that is unusual for them to have a conversation about it with a health care professional. Whether it's embarrassment, stigma, or a lack of understanding about which symptoms to look out for, there are many barriers that need to be broken. Through Check For Change, we are aiming to do just that, and ultimately help more people seek advice earlier.





# 02

## Executive Summary

Many of us do not like to discuss our toilet habits. There's a societal level of embarrassment that prevents many of us talking about our bladder and bowels and this permeates through all manner of potential symptoms and health concerns which might not be raised with anyone outside the four walls of a bathroom.

When it comes to our 'bathroom health', the impact of this personal embarrassment is clear – over one in four (26%) of us have avoided talking to a GP about bowel and urinary health, instead looking to 'Dr Google' to appease any concerns. There is a hugely important role for reliable online resources, but not at the expense of potentially serious symptoms going unchecked by medical professionals.

To fight this concerning finding, we're asking the public across the UK and Republic of Ireland to Check for Change. Not actively 'checking for change' in our regular bathroom habits and being too embarrassed to seek help from health care professionals if we do notice a difference, are significant barriers in the early diagnosis and treatment of health conditions.

We've worked with key experts, including Bladder & Bowel UK, NHS Doctor Emily MacDonagh, Nursing Times, NHS bladder and bowel expert Debbie Yarde, and our internal clinician teams to quantify and qualify the reasons some people may delay or avoid seeking medical advice when it comes to their bathroom health. We've sought to understand what barriers exist to accessing medical support, and outlined some key advice as to what we can do as an industry to ensure potential health concerns identified in the bathroom are treated as soon as possible.

- **Kevin Starr**, Country Manager UK & ROI, Essity



# 03 Key Findings

## Embarrassment is a barrier to accessing medical support



Over a quarter of survey respondents (**26%**) have delayed visiting their doctor over something they consider to be embarrassing, equating to nearly 14 million people.




More than a fifth (**21%**) have delayed visiting their GP before, to later be diagnosed with a health condition, which could have been diagnosed earlier.



On average, the public delay speaking to their GP for 27 days, whilst more than one in ten (**12%**) have delayed this for 2 years.



Despite also being taboo subjects, the public are twice as likely to be embarrassed to admit having wet or defecated themselves (**46%**) compared to admitting being in debt (**23%**) or struggling with mental health (**20%**).



“Bladder and Bowel UK continue to work to raise awareness of bladder and bowel issues in all age groups. We encourage people experiencing difficulties or who are concerned about bladder and bowel health to seek professional help and advice from their healthcare professional and not to self-manage, or suffer in silence. Much can be done to treat and manage symptoms. Many people can make a full recovery and there are NHS specialist bladder, bowel, and pelvic floor services, that offer assessment, treatment and management. Your GP will be able to refer you. The charity organisations are also able to signpost and provide support and advice to anyone affected, or to those who are supporting a person affected by bladder or bowel issues.”

**-Bladder & Bowel UK**

“Bladder and bowel problems are common in men and women of all ages and are not confined just to the elderly or those with other health problems. Many problems result from urban myths or bad habits and may not feel like a problem to begin with but over time they can become increasingly bothersome and debilitating. Even at their worst most bladder and bowel problems can be improved but seeking advice as early as possible is likely to result in a quicker and better outcome. Treatment is commonly based on simple lifestyle changes, exercises and learning new techniques. Once established bladder and bowel problems rarely improve on their own so seeking help and advice at an early stage is highly recommended.”

**-Debbie Yarde, NHS nurse and clinical lead for bladder and bowel care for Northern Devon NHS Healthcare Trust**



## Age is a major factor when it comes to seeking help



18-34 year olds are more likely to delay seeking help over a health issue they consider embarrassing when compared with older generations.

## Patients are seeking help in new ways, but not necessarily from reliable sources, and not as soon as they should



Patients experiencing symptoms related to their genitourinary, reproductive and bowel health for over a week, beyond visiting their GP, they are most likely to speak to a GP over the phone **(28%)**, Google their symptoms **(21%)**, seek information from the NHS website **(20%)**, or call 111 **(9%)**



What's more, **45%** of respondents report that they 'often' self-diagnose whether symptoms are serious or not based on online resources (e.g., the NHS website, WebMD)

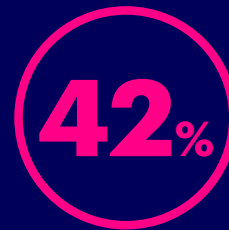


# 04

## Embarrassment is a barrier to accessing medical support

More than one in four (26%) of us have delayed visiting the doctor over something we consider to be embarrassing, with 14% of us having not visited a GP in the last year alone due to being embarrassed by symptoms. This increases to 27% of 18-34-year-olds. Concerningly, over one in ten (12%) of us have waited over two years to seek medical advice for a symptom we found embarrassing.

It's important to recognise the impact embarrassment may have when those who haven't visited a GP before regarding their bathroom health may one day need to, given that



of the general public having never visited their GP to discuss concerns related to their bladder or bowel.

In fact, almost half (46%) of respondents reported that losing control of bladder or bowel (incontinence) would be the most embarrassing thing to have to tell their partner, friend, or family member.

This ranked higher than telling loved ones about experiencing general health concerns (26%), mental health challenges (20%), or being in debt (23%). What's more, over a third (37%) would feel more comfortable talking about changes in a pet's stool or urine than their own, despite the directly comparable health topics.



## Most Embarrassing Incidents to Share with Family, Partners and Close Friends

<b>Having wet or defecated yourself</b>	<b>46%</b>
<b>Being in debt</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>Struggling with mental health</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Sending a flirtatious text to the wrong person</b>	<b>14%</b>
<b>Having lost your job</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Having fallen out with a friend</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Having lost an engagement ring</b>	<b>5%</b>

However, when we separately asked respondents who they would be most likely to speak to about a change in their bowel or urinary health, partners or spouses (54%) ranked top, just behind speaking with a GP or medical professional (55%). Given that speaking to our family, partners, and close friends about having wet or defecated ourselves is evidently an embarrassing topic to broach, this raises specific concerns as to how likely people are to address symptoms with their partner or medical experts, let alone anyone else.



“I am really excited to be involved in the Check for Change campaign with Essity. Looking at the research, it’s clear that there is a big issue with people feeling embarrassed about speaking to a doctor about their bodies – particularly when it comes to bathroom-related issues. Essity’s Check for Change campaign is something I feel passionate about: reassuring people that they do not need to be embarrassed about anything to do with their health can help us catch issues early. That is what medical professionals are here for and it is important that awareness is raised to help remove the stigma that is currently attached to ‘embarrassing’ problems. I would encourage everyone to check for change, to know their own bodies, and to seek advice at the earliest opportunity if they are concerned about health-related matters – ‘embarrassing’ or not, the NHS is here to help!”

**-Dr Emily MacDonagh, NHS Doctor**



## 05

# Patients aren't seeking help as soon as they should

If respondents do experience changes in their bathroom-related health, one of the key factors as to whether they access medical support is the duration of their symptoms.

Excessive flatulence, changes in stool smell, colour, consistency and shape, and bleeding between periods or after sex are the symptoms most likely to be ignored, whilst respondents are more likely to urgently visit their GP with regards to urine that is bloody, cloudy, or of an unusual colour, or for swelling, lumps, or abnormal growths.

Concerningly, even after experiencing a prolonged change in their bathroom-related health for over a week, only one in four (26%) would visit a GP.

For those who have experienced a change for longer than a week, respondents are most likely to speak to a GP over the phone (28%), Google their symptoms (21%), seek information from the NHS website (20%), or call 111 (9%). Women are more likely than men to wait to see if their symptoms go away, even after experiencing a symptom for over a week.



# 06

## Impact of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrably altered how the public engage with healthcare services too.

For example, nearly half (43%) of respondents had not visited their GP in the last 12 months as they didn't feel their symptoms were serious enough (compared to 14% who had not visited their GP due to being embarrassed).

However, over a quarter (29%) of the British public have tried to get an appointment with their GP but couldn't because of the impact of Covid-19. This is mirrored by those who have opted to not visit a GP because they assumed they wouldn't get an appointment (28%) and because they've heard people were being turned away from in-person appointments (25%). As we look beyond the pandemic, it's important that we, through campaigns like this, encourage the public to access medical advice when they need it.

"Our research has found that the embarrassment we can often feel around our toilet habits is leading to potentially concerning symptoms going unnoticed, left for or medical support not being accessed when it should be. Too often, we're more comfortable talking about the urine and stool of our children or pets, but consider our own health too taboo to discuss. Equally, we're seeing an increase in the number of people – particularly younger people – who are deciding whether or not to speak to their GP based on information they can find online."

**-Jane Mayes, Clinical Education Manager, Essity**



# 07

## Looking ahead

The impact of embarrassment on those accessing medical support is clear, and part of this impact is in the types of medical support the public feel comfortable accessing: 45% of respondents 'often' self-diagnose whether symptoms are serious or not based on online resources (e.g., the NHS website, WebMD). Younger patients are more likely to look to online health advice, with over half (56%) often doing so, compared to one in three (35%) over 55-year-olds.

Almost a quarter of respondents (24%) have specifically avoided speaking to their GP about bathroom-related concerns, and have used Google instead. Whilst there is a wealth of information available online, it's often important that symptoms of potentially concerning health issues are reviewed by medical experts in person. This could potentially become a generational or growing trend too, with 38% of 18-34-year-olds have avoided speaking to their GP about bathroom-related concerns and looked online instead, compared to 12% of over 55s.

The importance of ensuring that reliable information is freely available, explicitly addresses potential feelings of embarrassment, and encourages individuals to access medical advice if they experience a change in their bladder or bowel habit or symptoms, is evident.

"This survey illustrates why the public urgently need reliable and accessible information about bathroom—related concerns. Clear signposting to appropriate health services and advice for individuals about how to talk to their health professional is also vital. We also need nurses and doctors who have knowledge and training to sensitively ask the right questions and respond to their patients concerns. These skills are essential in ensuring that underlying problems are quickly identified, investigated and managed."

**-Eileen Shepherd, Senior Clinical Editor – Nursing Times**



# 08

## Conclusion

Throughout this research, we've seen how incredibly important it is that we fight this stigma around bathroom health. If something changes – whether it's how often you go to the loo, what your faeces and urine look like, or lumps and bumps where they shouldn't be – it's important we encourage the public to access professional medical support as soon as possible.

At Essity, we have committed to including a line on all TV advertisements for our incontinence care products (TENA) that advises anybody experiencing bladder weakness to speak with a healthcare professional. Our website, communications and packaging are also placing greater emphasis on the importance of treatment.

We will use our social media channels to ignite and encourage conversations around bathroom health and potential symptoms of concern, and use our partnerships with key spokespeople and professional organisations to drive conversations within the media and social media.

Essity will also engage directly with healthcare professionals to encourage trigger questions around genitourinary, reproductive and bowel health conditions during routine check-ups, ensuring we play our role in making sure we all understand our bodies, know what is normal for us, and regularly Check for Change.

- **Kevin Starr**, Country Manager UK & ROI, Essity



# Contact Us

**Essity** is a leading global hygiene and health company that develops, produces and sells Personal Care, Consumer Tissue and Professional Hygiene products and solutions. Our vision is; dedicated to improving well-being through leading hygiene and health solutions. Sales are conducted in approximately 150 countries under many strong brands, including the leading global brands TENA and Tork, and other brands, such as Leukoplast, Libero, Libresse, Lotus, Nosotras, Saba, Tempo, Vinda and Zewa. Essity has about 48,000 employees and net sales in 2016 amounted to approximately SEK 101bn (EUR 10.7bn). The business operations are based on a sustainable business model with focus on value creation for people and nature. The company has its headquarters in Stockholm, Sweden, and is listed on Nasdaq Stockholm. Essity used to be part of the SCA Group.

For more information about Essity and its Check for Change campaign contact or visit [www.Essity.com](http://www.Essity.com).

For further information about the symptoms addressed during this report or to find out how to access medical support, please visit [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk).

# Research Methodology

After an initial survey in April 2021, **Essity** surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,250 UK and ROI respondents via Opinium between the 30th July and 6th August 2021. Research was conducted in partnership with **Bladder & Bowel UK**, **Dr Emily MacDonagh**, and **Debbie Yarde**, NHS nurse and clinical lead for bladder and bowel care for Northern Devon NHS Healthcare Trust.

