Happiness is a clean toilet. Certainly, it’s somewhat distressing, when you need a toilet, and can only find a dirty, smelly one; or even worse, not be able to find a toilet at all. A recent study in the UK has shown that a quarter of pupils in England’s schools avoid using the toilets because of their poor condition and inadequate facilities.

According to the Continence Foundation of Australia (the CFA), this is a problem that also occurs in some Australian schools. So, during this year’s World Continence Awareness Week (24 – 30 June), with the theme Healthy Bladder and Bowel Habits, the CFA is launching its “Toilets Tactics Kit” as part of a major project to promote awareness and understanding of healthy bladder and bowel habits in Australian primary schools.

A pilot version of the kit can be viewed on the CFA website: www.continence.org.au. Amongst other things, it describes how our kidneys, bladder and bowels work and it provides a “school toilet charter” where it lists what we and our children should expect from a school toilet – things such as sufficient toilet paper, water, soap and paper towels or hand dryers.

Poor bladder and/or bowel habits are one cause of incontinence – that is the loss of voluntary control over bladder or bowel function. It’s one of the biggest health issues in the Australian community, affecting nearly four million people. It may not be life threatening, but incontinence can significantly affect quality of life and is sometimes a sign of more serious health problems.

Signs of poor or weak bladder and loss of urine control include: frequency (wanting to go to the toilet frequently); nocturia (waking up to go to the toilet more than twice at night); urgency (sudden urges to go to the toilet); and the involuntary or unintentional loss of urine from the bladder (that is wetting pants or wetting the bed).

Of course, poor bladder and urine control can happen to anyone at any age. Factors which increase risk are menopause, pregnancy, childbirth, having borne children, being overweight, and urinary tract infections. And while studies show that women are many times more likely to be affected by incontinence than men, men are far less likely to do anything about it.

Simple age-related prostate gland enlargement is often the cause in men. As well, medical conditions such as diabetes, obesity, constipation and chronic cough can cause or aggravate continence problems. As we get older, incontinence certainly becomes more prevalent and more severe; but incontinence is not just part of the ageing process. Certainly some age-related conditions increase the risk – conditions such as stroke, dementia, Parkinson’s disease or simply impaired mobility.

Unfortunately, less than 40% of people with incontinence ever seek professional help. Perhaps because they’re too embarrassed or too busy; or maybe they think nothing can be done; that it’s just a side effect of getting older or having children.

If you, or someone in your family, are affected, firstly get some good advice. Don’t let incontinence disturb your sleep or, worse still, ruin your social life. Talk to your doctor, your physiotherapist, your pharmacist or your nurse continence advisor. Bladder and bowel problems can be treated, managed and, in many cases, cured.

Pharmacists throughout Australia who provide the Pharmaceutical Society’s Self Care health information have a series of “fact cards” relating to continence: Bladder and Urine Control, Pelvic Floor Exercises, Prostate Problems and Urinary Tract Infection; all with self-help hints and great advice on how to best manage continence problems, whatever the cause.

To locate the nearest “Self Care” pharmacy log on to the Pharmaceutical Society (PSA) website at www.psa.org.au and click on “Self Care”, then “Find a Self Care Pharmacy” or phone PSA on 1300 369 772.