

# Paruresis: The phobia that makes peeing in public impossible



By Stuart Marsh ~ August 23rd, 2016

It's one of the most common social phobias in the entire nation, but nobody wants to talk about how uncomfortable peeing (or worse, pooping) can be in public.

[New research](#) from Swinburne University has uncovered how common paruresis (the fear of urinating in public) is in modern Australia, and it's surprisingly high: up to 35 percent of people suffer from a shy bladder when away from their home.

Study author [Dr Simon Knowles](#) argues that the main cause of paruresis (and its sister condition, shy bowel syndrome) is worrying what other people will think of us when they hear our trickling streams hitting the surface of the toilet water.

"Those who experience toilet anxiety will frequently worry about using a public toilet due to fears that others may hear or see them," explains Dr Knowles.

"This fear can often lead to individuals avoiding public toilets and in extreme cases lead to gastrointestinal problems."

[As we've explored before](#), holding onto your pee and poop for too long can have lasting ramifications.

"If adult women hold on for too long, often their bladder becomes distended and the muscle gets weak and they get a big floppy bladder that doesn't empty very well," urologist Dr Grahame Smith previously told Coach.

"The muscle starts having little contractions out of the blue instead of being relaxed and storing the urine at a low pressure."

To break the taboo of discussing paruresis, the researchers [have developed a scale](#) that helps people judge just how anxious – or how open – their bowels and bladders are when going to the loo in front of other people.

Ranging from "none of the time" to "all of the time", the scale asks respondents to rate their feelings towards statements like "The anxiety about urinating in public interferes with my social life" and "If there are other people in the restroom I wait until they leave before urinating".

Despite paruresis being relatively common, it's one of the least talked about social phobias, thanks largely to the fact that people are scared of being labeled "silly" or "irrational".

This can have a dramatic effect on their social and work lives, and the internet is [full of stories](#) of people who admit they can only poo if they're sitting on their own throne at home.

"For some of my patients, toilet anxiety is a major problem in their life and it can have a devastating impact on their ability to engage in many common activities we take for granted, such as shopping and going out for dinner," explains Dr Knowles.

"Ultimately, we aim to develop a treatment program to reduce shy bladder and shy bowel symptoms."

At this point, there's no instant cure for sufferers of paruresis or shy bowel syndrome, but there is a range of therapy options available.

Most patients are advised to avoid any negative self-talk and practice active relaxation techniques like deep breathing and rational problem solving. Then the sufferer can move onto graduated exposure therapy, where they and a friend attempt to urinate in increasingly difficult locations.