

# HEALTH

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## Campaign to open bathrooms to Crohn's, colitis patients launched



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TORONTO — If you have Crohn's disease or colitis, when you've got to go to the bathroom, you've really got to go.

For people with one of these two related diseases, that panic-inducing urgency can hit as many as 20 times a day, making finding the nearest unlocked washroom their No. 1 priority.

A new campaign spearheaded by Crohn's and Colitis Canada aims to open up doors that are often locked or off limits to all but customers of a restaurant, or the tenants of an office building.

The campaign, directed at business owners and municipalities, is aptly called GoHere.

Jennifer Wakeford is an event planner in Calgary who has been living with Crohn's for the past 12 years. She knows firsthand how badly needed this program is.

"Unlike your average individual, there's no notice.... I don't have a lot of time to pick a place to go or go somewhere where I'm comfortable. Often times I just need to find the closest washroom that I can get into right away," explains Wakeford, 33.

That can involve pleading with businesses to let her have access to locked bathrooms. The fact that people with Crohn's and colitis don't look sick can add to the awkwardness of the situation.

"I have to explain myself.... Begging is not necessarily the right term. But you have to over-share in order to gain access," Wakeford says.



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Canada has the highest rate of people with Crohn's and colitis in the world; it's estimated a quarter million Canadians live with one of these conditions.

"This is such an important thing for us to do," Mina Mawani, president and CEO of Crohn's and Colitis Canada, says of the GoHere program.

Mawani was in Calgary on Thursday to launch the campaign with Mayor Naheed Nenshi, who announced municipal buildings will take part.

Work is underway to expand the program to the Ontario cities of Barrie, Mississauga and Ottawa.

"I expect many more mayors, many more provinces to jump on the bandwagon," Mawani says.

Crohn's and colitis are auto-immune diseases, conditions brought on when the body's immune system attacks itself.

With these two, the immune system turns on the tissues of the colon (colitis) or any part of the gastrointestinal system (Crohn's). People who suffer from these diseases can experience intense abdominal pain, bleeding and frequent diarrhea.

There are drugs that can generally put the conditions into remission, gastroenterologist Dr. Gil Kaplan explains. But they don't work for everyone. And even people for whom they normally work can experience "flares" — periods when their disease is not controlled.

Open washrooms can be rarities in cities these days. Many restaurants, for instance, post signs that state washroom access is restricted to paying customers.

The stress of knowing they may not be able to find an open bathroom when they need it forces some people with Crohn's or colitis to restrict their movements.



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“For some people it’s actually paralyzing,” says Kaplan, who notes some of his clients plan their activities around where they know they’ll be able to find an accessible bathroom.

The campaign asks businesses to unlock those doors, making their facilities available “no questions asked,” says Natasha Mistry, manager of public policy and stakeholder relations with Crohn’s and Colitis Canada.

Participating businesses will post the GoHere decal, while people with Crohn’s or colitis can also download an app to find a nearby washroom. It will also give them an electronic card that identifies them as having Crohn’s or colitis.

Mistry says some businesses that may not agree to “no questions asked” access to their bathrooms may nonetheless allow people with the app to use their facilities.

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