

**What Crohn's and Colitis Canada calls for:**

People living with Crohn's disease (CD) and ulcerative colitis (UC) call for **greater access to public and private washroom facilities across the province**. Many people living with CD and UC face challenges when dealing with fecal incontinence. Some problems include public spaces not having enough or no stalls, experiencing difficulty in finding a washroom or having to wait in line. In some public places, retailers restrict washroom access to 'customers only'. Sometimes people with CD or UC have been in situations where they pleaded with a store owner to use washrooms that were for employee use only. For children, asking a teacher for permission to visit the washroom can be problematic and embarrassing.

**Background:**

There are approximately a quarter million Canadians living with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. Crohn's and colitis are episodic, debilitating, chronic conditions that affect children and adults of all ages. Symptoms are directly associated with inflammation of the gastrointestinal tract and the lining of the colon. Sudden urges to go to the washroom, incontinence, abdominal pain, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting and fatigue are common symptoms of these immune-mediated diseases. Moreover, there is a risk of developing colorectal cancer from enduring Crohn's and colitis.

Frequent visits to the washroom are the most important aspect of these diseases people want to control and limit. Indeed, in a 2011 survey, 73% of respondents said they experienced between five to 20 bowel movements or false urges each day during active disease (flare-up). Thirteen percent of respondents had more than 20 movements or urges a day.

As one male adult living with Crohn's and colitis explained the stigma associated with the disease, *"living with colitis means being close to a washroom wherever you go and it dramatically alters your lifestyle. I need to plan my daily activities based on the availability of a washroom. It also makes it awkward when I have to explain to others why I need to excuse myself on a moment's notice. It is something I don't want to share with people I just met."*

**Basic Facts:**

In 2011, Crohn's and Colitis Canada collected over 1,300 responses for a national survey looking into the impact of access to washrooms. Some of the results below demonstrate the difficulty that people living with Crohn's and colitis face daily:

- 44% of English and 39% of French respondents have had an accident in public due to washroom inaccessibility;
- 53% of all respondents had to negotiate or share private details of their condition to use washrooms;
- 78% of English and 75% of French respondents have chosen to stay home during a flare-up for fear of not being able to access a washroom;
- 33% of English and 23% of French respondents said the fear of having an accident has influenced their career choices

## **Opportunities for Change:**

Crohn's and Colitis Canada is working on a number of initiatives to help increase washroom access.

The GoHere decal project, [www.go-here.ca](http://www.go-here.ca), encourages businesses to open their bathroom facilities to people living with Crohn's, colitis and other incontinence issues. Businesses identify their participation in the project by posting GoHere decals. If successful, the initiative will roll out in other areas across the province and country. A pilot of the project is being launched in Calgary.

An updated mobile app is being developed to help users find immediate washrooms using their GPS. Users are encouraged to populate information on washrooms and describe the facilities. Crohn's and Colitis Canada is also looking at re-launching a washroom access card that will provide security and will help explain to retailers the urgent need for washroom access.

In Ontario, the five accessibility standards of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) are a positive step forward and has helped to progress customer service, transportation, employment, information and communication support for people living with disabilities. The customer services standard provides guidelines where organizations are required to exert their best efforts to provide services in a way that people with disabilities (episodic and permanent) can access them.

The City of Toronto has set a gold standard in addressing challenges for people with chronic conditions to access washrooms in retailers. The City has amended a by-law where retail establishments over 300 square meters are required to provide separate male and female washrooms.<sup>1</sup> For retail establishments less than 300 square meters, at least one washroom facility is provided. The exception to this bylaw is where the establishment is staffed by a single operator or attendant, the retail establishment is not required to provide washroom facilities for customers.

## **General Recommendations:**

We call on the provincial governments and municipalities to:

- Encourage provinces and municipalities across the province to amend legislation and by-laws like the City of Toronto that guarantee public washroom access in retail facilities. The by-law would eliminate 'staff only' or 'customer only' access for those living with incontinence challenges;
- Encourage all levels of government to participate in the decal initiative and allow people living with incontinence to get access to open washrooms at government operated service facilities.

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<sup>1</sup> City of Toronto By-Law amendment to the Property Standards section of the Municipal Code, "Washrooms within Retail Establishments," August 1, 2009. Accessed on August 10, 2013: [toronto.ca/legdocs/bylaws/2009/law0570.pdf](http://toronto.ca/legdocs/bylaws/2009/law0570.pdf)