



Toilet anxiety? Yes, it's a thing.

The fear of others hearing you use the toilet. It has medical names, a government campaign, and a simple fix Japan has used for decades.

6 to 35%

of people experience toilet anxiety to some degree, according to Swinburne University researchers

2024

Queensland Health runs a public campaign telling people it's okay to poo at work

1979

Japan's first electronic toilet sound device goes on sale

What it is

Toilet anxiety is a fear of being heard, judged or interrupted while using a toilet, especially a shared or public one. It has two medical names:

Paruresis

"Shy bladder". Difficulty urinating when others may hear or be nearby.

Parcopresis

"Shy bowel". Difficulty opening your bowels when others may hear or be nearby.

Researchers at Swinburne University, including Dr Simon Knowles and Dr Jason Skues, have studied bladder and bowel related anxieties and published a classification of them in *Current Psychology* (Kuoch, Meyer, Austin and Knowles, 2021).

What people do: wait for the next cubicle to empty, hold on all day at work or school, or flush twice and cough to cover the sound.

A health department said it out loud

In September 2024 Queensland Health ran a campaign telling adults it is okay to poo at work. When a state health department treats it as a public health message, it's not a novelty.

How Japan handles it

Press a button or wave a hand, and a speaker in the cubicle plays the sound of running water or a forest stream. Nobody hears you. Japan's first electronic device went on sale in 1979 during a Tokyo drought, and TOTO's Otohime ("Sound Princess") followed in 1988. Today they're standard in Japanese office and public toilets.

"I wish I had this growing up in Australia in the 1970s. Using the toilet at school was a desperate exercise in trying not to be laughed at by the girls in the stalls nearby."

Donna Burke, founder, Japan Toilet Sound

About Japan Toilet Sound

Founded by Donna Burke, who lived in Tokyo for 30 years and is the English voice of Japan's Shinkansen bullet train. The wall-mounted device plays a Japanese forest stream with a wave of the hand. A free phone app is at japantoiletsound.com/app.

Sources: Swinburne University, toilet anxiety research, swinburne.edu.au. Kuoch K., Meyer D., Austin D., Knowles S. (2021), classification of bladder and bowel related anxieties, *Current Psychology* 40: 4004 to 4011. Queensland Health campaign, reported by B&T, September 2024. Hornyak T., *The New York Times*, 2 December 2025.