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Building a healthier community.
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mental health

Coping with Incontinence

Incontinence can be upsetting and humiliating for the person with dementia and stressful for the caregiver. But approaching the problem with understanding, matter-of-factness and humor can improve the situation for everyone concerned.

Although incontinence can be a distressing problem, it's a surprisingly common one, so the good news is that there is plenty of help out there. The first steps to dealing with incontinence are to get properly informed about the problem and to find out what help and support is available.

What is incontinence?

There are two types of incontinence:

- Urinary incontinence – when someone loses control of their bladder
- Fecal incontinence – when someone loses control of their bowels.

This may happen all or most of the time, or the person may just experience the occasional leakage. Urinary incontinence is far more common than fecal incontinence. Either way, both types of incontinence may be treatable, so the first step is to consult the GP.

Why is incontinence so distressing?

Hygiene is a very personal issue. From a very young age, we are trained to control our urges to go to the toilet, so incontinence can make a person feel that they are losing control. This can affect their sense of dignity and self esteem.

Many people find it very hard to accept that they need help from someone else in such an intimate area of their life – even (or sometimes, especially) if the person is very close to them.

How can it affect people with dementia?

People with dementia react differently to the experience of incontinence. Some people find it very distressing and humiliating, while others appear to accept it. Common occurrences include:

Hiding the evidence

If someone feels very ashamed of their incontinence, they may try to hide the evidence.

They may take off their wet or soiled clothes and hide them, or wrap feces in a parcel and try to throw it away.

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Toileting in the wrong place

If someone becomes confused about their surroundings, they may urinate in an inappropriate place, such as a wastepaper basket, because they have mistaken it for a toilet.

How can you help as a caregiver?

If the person you are caring for has an accident, the three most important things you can do are:

- Try to overcome any embarrassment or distaste you may feel.
- Don't be angry or appear upset.
- Remember it's not their fault.

This may not be easy, however. If you're finding your feelings difficult to handle, talk them through with your community nurse or continence adviser. It's important to try not to let dealing with incontinence get in the way of your relationship with the person you are caring for.

Why might someone with dementia become incontinent?

Incontinence is not an inevitable symptom of dementia, but there are a number of reasons why someone with dementia could become incontinent. These include various medical conditions. People with dementia may also develop problems because they:

- Forget to go to the toilet
- Mistake other things, such as a wastepaper basket, for the toilet
- Don't know where the toilet is.

Treatable conditions

Conditions that may cause urinary incontinence include:

- **Urinary tract infections** These usually respond to treatment with medication.
- **Prostate gland trouble** This affects men, and may be resolved with an operation.
- **Side-effects of medication** The GP can address this by changing the person's prescription or altering the dose.
- **Severe constipation** Constipation can put pressure on the bladder, and can also lead to fecal incontinence. Eating foods that are high in fiber, drinking plenty of fluids and keeping physically active can help prevent this.

Practical considerations

If the person you are caring for has problems with incontinence, the first thing to check is whether they are able to get to the toilet without any problems. They may want to use the toilet but be unable to use it, or even to find it.

- Make sure that the person knows where the toilet is. A sign on the door may help. A visual reminder, such as a picture, may be more effective than words.
- Make sure that there are no obstacles, such as awkwardly placed furniture, in the person's way, or doors that are hard to open, obstructing the way to the toilet.
- Leave the toilet door open when not in use so that the person does not think that somebody is in there.
- Make sure the toilet is easy to use. If you think the person could benefit from aids such as handrails, ask the GP to put you in contact with an occupational therapist, who can offer advice free of charge.
- Make sure the person's clothes can be quickly removed and unfastened. Some people find Velcro fastenings easier to use than zips or buttons.
- If it becomes too difficult for the person to get to the toilet, an aid such as a commode may be useful. Ask your community nurse for advice.

Other ways to help

Use the following tips to help reduce the number of accidents:

- Remind the person to go to the toilet, or take them there, at regular intervals. You may be able to manage fecal incontinence by taking the person to the toilet at a set time, if their habits are regular.

- Be aware of signs that the person wants to go to the toilet. These may include fidgeting, getting up and down, or pulling at their clothes.
- If the person is incontinent at night, encourage them to avoid drinks for two or three hours before going to bed. However, make sure that they drink plenty of fluids during the day.

Incontinence aids

If you've tried everything you can and the person is still having problems with incontinence, there are plenty of ways to help them feel more comfortable while also protecting items such as clothes and bedding. Various products are available from your local continence adviser or community nurse. You can find others at the chemist.

- **Waterproof bedding**— You can protect the mattress with a waterproof cover. However, make sure the sheet doesn't come into contact with the person's skin as it can make the skin chafed and sore. You can also buy special protective duvet covers and pillowcases.
- **Absorbent undersheets** — Reusable undersheets are available for beds and chair beds. They enable the person to lie or sit on a dry surface.
- **Incontinence pads and pants** — These can be worn day and night, or during the night only, to keep the area next to the person's skin dry. Make sure they are the right absorbency, that they do not chafe, and that they are changed as often as necessary.

For more advice on these and other aids, talk to your community nurse or continence adviser.

Ensuring good personal hygiene

Incontinence can lead to skin irritation and may make the person feel generally uncomfortable. It's important to act quickly after someone has had an accident to make sure they feel comfortable and to ensure good hygiene.

- If they have become wet or soiled, help them to wash afterwards with mild soap and warm water, and dry them carefully before putting on fresh pads and clothes.
- Moist toilet tissues can be useful for minor accidents.
- Wash soiled clothes or bedding immediately, or soak them in an airtight container until they are washed.
- Put used pads in an appropriate container.