

Incontinence

Incontinence can be upsetting and humiliating for the person with dementia as well as stressful for the carer. However, there are many ways in which the situation can be improved for everyone concerned. Here are some suggestions.

in·con·ti·nent

–adjective

1. unable to restrain natural discharges or evacuations of urine or faeces.

Incontinence is not an inevitable symptom of dementia. There are many different reasons why a person with dementia may become incontinent. It is important to seek advice as soon as possible and to ensure that the person with dementia and the carer receive appropriate help and support.

Incontinence occurs when someone loses control of their bladder (urinary incontinence) or their bowels (faecal incontinence). People may also develop problems because they forget to go to the toilet, mistake other things such as a waste paper basket for the toilet, don't know where it is or no longer recognize the urge to urinate.

This may happen all or most of the time or only occasionally. Urinary incontinence is far more common than faecal incontinence. Both may be due to physical conditions, which are treatable so the first step is to consult the GP, Clinic or Community Health Centre.

Please contact the DEMENTIA SA Office

Support | Awareness | Education | Counseling | Training | Resource centre | Advocacy
info@dementiasa.org or support@dementiasa.org www.dementiasa.org

National Helpline 0860 MEMORY / 0860 636 679

Treatable conditions

Among the conditions which may cause urinary incontinence are:

- A urinary tract infection. This usually responds to treatment with medication.
- Prostate gland condition in men. An operation may be advised.
- The side effects of drugs. The GP may change the drugs or alter the dosage .
- Severe constipation may put pressure on the bladder and can also lead to faecal incontinence.
- Eating foods which are rich in fibre, drinking plenty of fluids and keeping physically active will help.

More possible causes to be aware of:

Medical/Disabling conditions

- Stroke, Diabetes, Parkinson's Disease

Physical Disabilities

- May prevent person getting to the toilet quickly enough

Medication

- Diuretics
- Sleeping medication and anxiety reducing drugs may relax the bladder muscle.

Beverages

- Too much tea or coffee can act as a diuretic.

“Don’t withhold fluids. Dehydration can lead to urinary track infections and other complications.”

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Other sources of help

- Where there is no immediate treatment, the GP may also be able to advise. The person with dementia may be referred to a community nurse.
- It helps if you can remain calm and matter of fact when dealing with incontinence. Always remember that it is not the fault of the person with dementia.

Useful strategies

These may include:

- Reminding the person to go to the toilet or taking them to the toilet at regular intervals during the day. Faecal incontinence can sometimes be managed by taking the person to the toilet at a set time, if their habits are regular.
- Take extra clothing on outings in case of accidents.
- Be aware that signs such as fidgeting, getting up and down or pulling at clothes may indicate that the person wants to go to the toilet. Watch the signs and routine and plan around them.
- Make sure that the toilet is easy to identify and that it is easy to use. An occupational therapist can advise on aids such as handrails.
- Make sure that the person has clothes that can be quickly removed and unfastened. Velcro fastenings rather than zips or buttons may be simpler to use if the person finds this acceptable.
- Give enough time in the toilet.
- Avoid drinks for two or three hours before the person goes to bed if they are incontinent at night. However, you should make sure that they drink plenty of fluids during the day.
- Make sure that there are no obstacles, such as awkwardly placed furniture and loose mats in the person's way or doors that are hard to open.
- Make sure that the person knows where the toilet is. A sign on the door may help – pictures are often better than words, or give reminders.
- If it becomes too difficult for the person to get to the toilet or if it is too far away, a commode may be useful.

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Incontinence aids

If encouraging the person to go to the toilet at regular intervals is not sufficient to prevent incontinence, there are many other ways you can make the person more comfortable and protect items such as clothes and bedding. Incontinence products can be bought from a pharmacy.

- You can protect the mattress with a waterproof cover but make sure that it does not come into contact with the person's skin, as it will cause soreness. Special protective covers can be obtained for duvets and pillows.
- Absorbent, reusable undersheets for beds and chair beds enable the person to lie or sit on a dry surface.
- Special pads and pants for men and women can be worn, day and night or just during the night, which keep the area next to the person's skin dry. It is important to make sure that these are the right absorbency, that they do not chafe, and that they are changed as often as necessary.

Hygiene

Incontinence can lead to skin irritation and may make the person feel generally uncomfortable. If they have become wet or soiled, assist them to wash with a mild soap and warm water and dry them carefully before putting on fresh pads and clothes. Used pads should be placed in an appropriate container and soiled clothes and bedding should be washed immediately or soaked in an airtight container until washed.

Confused behavior

People with dementia react differently to the experience of incontinence. Some people find it very distressing and humiliating; Others appear to accept it. Some people try to hide the evidence. They may take off wet or soiled clothes to dispose of them or they may urinate in an inappropriate place such as a wastepaper basket because they have mistaken it for a toilet.

They may become confused about their surroundings. Although you will probably find the situation distressing, it will not help either of you if you become angry. The person cannot help their behaviour. They will need your reassurance and support.

Feelings

Personal hygiene is a very private issue for all of us. Many people find it very hard to accept that they may need someone else to help them, even someone very close to them, which is why this subject can be so stressful.

Try to get over any embarrassment or distaste you may feel. You need to be tactful and sensitive when helping someone in such an intimate way. If you are finding your feelings difficult to handle, discuss this at a support group. It is important not to let dealing with incontinence get in the way of your relationship. Don't embarrass the person. Rather say "something spilt on you." Let's change your trousers instead of "You wet yourself!" Learn the person's "trigger" words or phrases e.g. they may say "I don't know what to do" when they really want to use the toilet.

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