

Activities of Daily Living & Other Problems

Continence management

Incontinence is often very upsetting and humiliating for people with dementia as well as stressful for carers. However, there are many ways in which you can help to prevent or manage incontinence which can improve the situation for everyone concerned. Here are some suggestions.

There are many different reasons why people with dementia may become incontinent. It is important to seek advice as soon as possible and to ensure that the person receives appropriate help or support.

Incontinence occurs when someone loses control of their bladder (urinary incontinence) or their bowels (faecal incontinence). It may happen all or most of the time, or just occasionally. Urinary incontinence is far more common than faecal incontinence but both may be due to treatable conditions. Therefore, the first step is to consult the GP.

Treatable conditions

Among the conditions which may cause urinary incontinence are:

- a urinary tract infection: this usually responds to medication
- prostate gland trouble (in men): an operation may be advised
- the side-effects of drugs: the GP may change the drugs or alter the dose
- severe constipation which causes incontinence as a result of pressure on the bladder: eating foods rich in fibre and drinking plenty of liquid may deal with the constipation. Exercise may also help.

Faecal incontinence may sometimes be caused by severe constipation where diarrhoea leaks out around the hard stool blocking the bowel.

Other sources of help

The GP may also advise on ways to manage the situation where there is no obvious immediate treatment or may refer you to the public health nurse. The public health nurse can make a home visit to assess the situation and suggest strategies or other measures that will make it easier for you and the person with dementia to cope. It helps if you can remain calm and matter of fact when dealing with incontinence and remember that it is not the person's fault.

Useful strategies

These may include:

- Reminding the person to go to the toilet or taking them at regular intervals. Faecal incontinence can sometimes be managed by taking the person at a set time, if their habits are regular.
- Being aware of signs such as fidgeting, getting up and down or pulling at clothes that may indicate that the person needs to go to the toilet.
- Making sure that the toilet is easy to use. An occupational therapist can advise on aids such as handrails.
- Making sure that the person has clothes that can be quickly removed or unfastened. Velcro fastenings rather than zips or buttons may be simpler if the person has difficulty in managing clothes.
- Avoiding drinks for several hours before the person goes to bed if the person is incontinent at night. However, you should make sure that they drink plenty during the day.

- Making sure that there are no obstacles in the person's way such as awkwardly placed furniture or doors which are hard to open.
- Making sure that they remember where the toilet is. A sign on the door may help or they may need reminding.
- If it is too difficult for the person to get to the toilet, a toilet aid such as a commode may be useful. Your health professional can advise.

Incontinence aids

If frequent use of the toilet is not sufficient to prevent incontinence, there are a variety of measures you can take to make the person more comfortable and to protect items such as clothes and bedding. Depending on eligibility some incontinence products may be available through the public health nurse through the local health centre. Products can also be bought from a chemist or a supplier who will have an advisor. (For incontinence suppliers, see end.)

- 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 this may cause soreness. Special protective covers can be obtained for continental quilts and pillows.
- Special absorbent, reusable undersheets and bed and chair pads are available which enable a person to lie or sit on a dry surface.
- Special pads and pants can be worn, either just at night or for night and day, which enable the area next to the person's skin to remain dry. It is important to make sure these are the right absorbency, that they do not chafe and that they are changed as often as necessary.

The health professional can advise on other aids as appropriate.

Hygiene

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

Confused behaviour

Sometimes the person with dementia may behave in what seems a rather bizarre way perhaps because they are ashamed of their incontinence or confused about their surroundings. They may hide wet underwear, for example, urinate into a wastepaper basket, or may occasionally wrap their faeces in a parcel and hide them. Although this will be distressing for you, try not to get angry. The person will need reassurance. Discuss ways of coping with your health professional.

Feelings

Try to get over any embarrassment or distaste you may feel about helping the person in such an intimate way. You need to be tactful and sensitive as the situation may also be upsetting for the person with dementia. It may help to discuss your feelings with your health professional. It is important not to let dealing with incontinence get in the way of your relationship.

More information on incontinence, contact:

TIRIM
Bladder Control Information Service (Urinary)
Ph: 1850 476 476
or by post at: PO Box 6235, Dublin 17.

Incontinence Unit,
St James' Hospital, Dublin 8.
Ph: 01-453 7941.

A range of incontinence products are available from:

HumanCare Ltd,
Jamestown Business Park, Finglas, Dublin 11.
Ph: 01-864 0990 or Callsave 1850 48 14 81
(distribute nationwide)

Fannin Medicare Ltd.,
Unit 3, The Square Indst. Complex,
Tallaght, Dublin 24.
Ph: 01-466 4130 Fax: 01-466 4138
(distribute nationwide)

Retail Outlet:
Fannin Medicare Ltd
14-16 Redmonds Hill, Aungier Street, Dublin 2
Ph: 01-476 0680

PEI,
M50 Business Park,
Ballymount Road Upper, Dublin 12
Ph: 01- 419 6900 Fax: 01-419 6999