

Incontinence - tips for carers

Incontinence means any involuntary leakage of urine or faeces. Incontinence can occur in men or women of any age but a person who is elderly, disabled or has a chronic health problem is at increased risk.

While incontinence is a challenging problem for a carer help is available from a range of sources so don't think you must cope alone. Your doctor is a good starting point for information, advice, treatment and referral.

Help is available

Caring for an ill loved one is demanding and incontinence adds considerably to the stress. Many carers feel overwhelmed, frustrated, angry and upset about having to cope with a loved one's incontinence. These feelings are normal. Remember that incontinence is not an inevitable part of ageing or disability. Effective treatments are available.

Continence assessment explained

There are different types and causes of incontinence. A continence assessment helps the doctor (or other health professional such as a continence nurse) to work out an effective treatment program. The doctor will need to know the person's medical history. In most cases the doctor will also perform a physical examination, which may include a vaginal or rectal examination.

The doctor will ask you for detailed information about the person's incontinence signs and symptoms, which may include:

- How often the person goes to the toilet to both urinate and defecate (poo)
- Rough estimate of the amount of urine passed
- Visual description of the faeces
- Whether the leakage is urine or faeces
- Details of diet and fluid intake
- List of medications including prescription, over-the-counter and herbal preparations
- Current health concerns
- Self-care abilities – for example, whether the person can feed, dress and bathe on their own
- Whether or not the person recognises their need to go to the toilet or remembers the location of the toilet.

Incontinence treatment

Medical treatment depends on the type and cause of the person's incontinence. Be guided by your doctor, but treatment options may include:

- Increased fluid intake of up to two litres a day
- High-fibre diet
- Pelvic floor exercises
- Bladder training
- Training in good toilet habits
- Medications, such as a short-term course of laxatives to treat constipation
- Aids such as incontinence pads.

General suggestions

Medical treatment may take a while to work or it may manage the incontinence but not cure it. Be guided by your doctor, but general suggestions for carers include:

- The person you care for may be deeply distressed and ashamed about their incontinence. Aim to be calm and patient. Talk openly together about the situation.
- Try to accept your own discomfort and embarrassment. Humour can help.
- Despite effective treatment, accidents may happen from time to time. Try to keep a relaxed attitude as much as possible.
- Look after yourself too. Plan breaks from caring on a regular basis to give yourself time to recharge.

Practical suggestions

Suggestions include:

- Pads for urinary or bowel incontinence are available. Call the National Continence Helpline for advice about pads and funding, or contact your pharmacist.
- Change pads frequently and as required.
- Clothing with velcro fasteners or elasticised waistbands may be easier to manage than clothing with zippers or buttons.
- Choose machine-washable garments that don't require ironing.
- Protective garments (for example, plastic or rubber garments) may cause rashes if they contact the skin. Check the fit of protective garments and adjust if necessary.

Toileting suggestions

Suggestions include:

- Consider aids such as a raised toilet or a wall-mounted grab bar if the person is unsteady on their feet. Remove floor mats and make sure the seat is securely fastened to the toilet.
- Don't rush the person while they are on the toilet. Music can help create a calm and unhurried atmosphere.
- Run a tap or give the person water to sip if they have trouble urinating.
- Take note of the person's toileting patterns and suggest they visit the toilet at times appropriate to their pattern. Making notes on how often the person urinates and defecates can also help you and your doctor to recognise and assess the severity of problems such as constipation.
- Consider a portable commode, which is kept by the bed, if the toilet is too far away for the person to reliably reach in time.
- Use disabled toilets if they are available when you are out. A disabled toilet is usually unisex and has room to fit two people.
- Try to accommodate the person's need for privacy whenever possible. If privacy isn't possible, use a relaxed demeanour to set the mood. Humour may help to dispel embarrassment or upset.

Hygiene suggestions

Suggestions include:

- Wear disposable latex gloves (available from most supermarkets and pharmacies) when you are helping the person to clean up.
- Wash the person's skin afterwards. Pat dry and apply a barrier cream, sparingly to prevent irritation.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water afterwards, even if you wore disposable gloves.
- Dispose of used pads and gloves appropriately. Do not flush pads or gloves down the toilet.

When to see the doctor

The following events need prompt medical attention:

- Inability to urinate
- Sudden bedwetting or loss of urinary control
- Chronic constipation
- Diarrhoea that lasts longer than 24 hours
- Persistent skin rash that doesn't respond to scrupulous hygiene and barrier creams
- Strong negative emotions such as anger, stress or depression experienced by the person or the carer.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Pharmacist
- Your local continence clinic or service
- National Continence Hotline Tel. 1800 33 00 66
- Victorian Continence Resource Centre Tel. (03) 9816 8266
- Commonwealth Carers Resource Centre Tel. 1800 242 636
- Commonwealth Carer Respite Centre Tel. 1800 059 059
- Aged Care Information Line Tel. 1800 500 853

Things to remember

- A person who is elderly, disabled or has a chronic health problem is at increased risk of urinary or faecal incontinence.
- While incontinence is a challenging problem for a carer, help is available.
- Your doctor is a good starting point for information, advice, treatment and referral.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Victorian Continence Resource Centre

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