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WHAT IS INCONTINENCE?

There are two types of incontinence:
Urinary incontinence- when someone loses control of their bladder
Faecal incontinence- when someone loses control of their bowels

This may happen all or most of the time, or may just be a case of occasional leakage. Urinary incontinence is far more common than faecal incontinence. Both types of incontinence may be treatable.

Why is incontinence so distressing?
Hygiene is a very personal issue. This can affect a person's 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 from someone very close to them.

Why might someone become incontinent?
There are a number of reasons why someone would become incontinent. these include various medical conditions, a number of which are treatable.

Medical causes include:
- Urinary tract infections- these usually respond to treatment with medication.
- Side effects of medication- Your healthcare provider can address this by changing the persons prescription or altering the dose.
- Severe constipation- constipation can put pressure on the bladder, and can also lead to faecal incontinence.

No medical causes include:
- Forgetting to go to the toilet
- Not recognising the need to go to the toilet, because of the damage caused by dementia of other neurological conditions
- Forgetting where the toilet is

How may a person with dementia react to being incontinent?
Every individual will react differently to the experience of incontinence. Some people find it very upsetting, while others find it easier to accept. Common occurrences among people with incontinence 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 faeces in a parcel and try to throw it away.
- Going to the loo 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

TIPS: dealing with an accident
Approach the problem with understanding, matter-of-factness and humour can improve the situation for everyone concerned.
If someone has an accident, the three most important things a carer can do are to:
- *Try overcome any embarrassment or distaste they may feel*
- *Avoid being angry or appearing upset*
- *Remember that it's not the person fault*

Ideas to reduce accidents

- When someone 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 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 in the way, such as awkwardly placed furniture or doors that are hard to open, obstructing the way to the toilet.
- Leave the toilet door open when not in use so it is obvious when the toilet is vacant.
- Check the placement of mirrors in the bathroom. The person with dementia may confuse the image they see for someone else in the bathroom.
- Make sure any clothing can be quickly removed and unfastened. Some people find Velcro fastenings easier to use than zips or buttons.

If the person has accidents, carers or professionals may find it helps if they do the following:

- Remind the person to go to the toilet, or take them there at regular intervals. Taking the person to the toilet at a set time can help prevent incontinence, 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.
- If it becomes too difficult for the person to get to the toilet, an aid such as a commode may be useful. Ask your healthcare provider for advise.

Incontinence aids

If you've tried everything you can and the person is still experiencing problems with incontinence, there are plenty of ways to help them feel more comfortable while also protecting items such as clothes and bedding.

- Waterproof bedding — This will protect the mattress. However, make sure the sheet doesn't come into contact with the skin, as it may become chafed and sore.
- Absorbent undersheets — Reusable undersheets provide a dry surface on beds and chair beds.
- Incontinence pads and pants— These can be worn day and night, or during the night only, to keep the area next to the skin dry.

Ensuring good personal hygiene

Incontinence can lead to skin irritation. It is important to act quickly, to make sure they feel comfortable again and to ensure good hygiene. If someone has 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.

Wash soiled clothes or bedding immediately, or soak them in an airtight container until they are washed. Put used pads in an appropriate container.

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