

Incontinence

As dementia progresses into the middle stage, some people may begin to experience loss of bladder or bowel control (incontinence). While the nature and severity of incontinence can vary among individuals, all persons with dementia will experience incontinence in the late stage of the disease.

Causes include the inability to recognize natural urges, forgetting where the bathroom is or side effects from medicine. Be sure to have the doctor rule out medical problems as the cause. While incontinence can be upsetting to the person with dementia and the caregiver, the tips in this topic sheet can help you cope and can inform how you and others provide care.

Causes of incontinence

If a person with Alzheimer's has recently started to lose control of his or her bladder and bowels, the first and most important step is to determine the possible cause. Consider the following:

Environment and clothing

- Make sure the person can find the bathroom.
- Remove obstacles such as furniture in the path to the bathroom; make sure the path is well-lit.
- Provide clothes that are easy to remove.

Medications and diuretics

- Urinary tract infection, constipation or a prostate problem.
- Diabetes, stroke or a muscular disorder such as Parkinson's disease.
- Physical disabilities that prevent the person from reaching the bathroom in time.
- Neuropsychiatric challenges such as paranoia about safety in bathroom or about those assisting with the toileting process.

Dehydration

Don't withhold fluids. This could cause dehydration, which could lead to a urinary tract infection and increased incontinence.

Tips for managing incontinence

The following tips can help caregivers manage incontinence in a person with Alzheimer's disease:

Understand

Find ways to help the person keep his or her dignity. For example, say, "It looks like it's time to change clothes" instead of saying, "You wet yourself."

- Be matter-of-fact; don't scold or make the person feel guilty.
- Respect the need for privacy as much as possible.

Communicate

- Ask the person on a regular basis whether he or she needs to use the toilet.
- Watch for nonverbal cues such as restlessness, making unusual sounds or faces, pacing, sudden silences or hiding in corners. These cues may indicate the need to use the toilet.
- Use adult words, not baby talk, to refer to using the toilet.
- Learn the person's trigger words or phrases for needing to use the toilet. The person may use words that have nothing to do with the bathroom – for example, "I can't find the light" – but to that person means going to the bathroom.

Make it easy to find and use the toilet

- Keep the bathroom door open so the toilet is visible.
- Put a picture of a toilet on the bathroom door.

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- Paint the bathroom door with a color in contrast to the wall.
- Make the toilet safe and easy to use. For example, raise the toilet seat, install grab bars on both sides of the toilet, and use nightlights to illuminate the bedroom and bath.
- Consider a portable commode or urinal for the bedroom.
- Remove plants, wastebaskets and other objects that could be mistaken for a toilet.
- Remove throw rugs that may cause a person to trip and fall.

Plan ahead

- Observe and recognize the person's routine toilet schedule.
- Remind the person to use the bathroom just before his or her usual time.
- Try setting a regular schedule for toilet use. For example, help the person to the bathroom first thing in the morning, every two hours during the day, immediately after meals and just before bedtime.
- Identify when accidents tend to occur, and then plan around them. If they happen every two hours, get the person to the bathroom before that time.

Follow up

- Check the toilet to see if the person has urinated and/or moved his or her bowels.

- Help the person wipe and flush the toilet.
- Regularly wash sensitive skin areas and apply powder or ointment.

Monitor fluids

- Limit the person's intake of liquids before bedtime.
- Cut down on drinks that stimulate urination, such as cola, coffee, tea and juice.

Adjust and innovate

- Choose clothing that is easy to remove and to clean.
- If necessary, consider using some incontinence products, such as padded, washable incontinence undergarments or adult briefs.
- Give the person plenty of time in the bathroom to empty his or her bladder and bowels.
- Run water in the sink or give the person a drink to stimulate urination.
- Rubber sheets or incontinence pads on a person's bed may help keep fluid from soaking into the mattress.

Incontinence can be a very challenging issue for many families dealing with dementia. If you would like additional help with this issue, we encourage you to call our 24/7, toll-free Helpline at 800.272.3900 and ask to speak to a care consultant. Care consultants include emotional support, practical information and connection to local resources.

alzheimer's  association

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How to Contact the Alzheimer's Association – Heart of America Chapter
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The Heart of America Chapter provides programs and services in 66 counties in Kansas and Missouri. These programs and services are made possible thanks to generous donations from individuals, corporations, and foundations. Contributions and donations allow the Chapter to provide supportive services, including care consultations, free of charge to individuals and families.