

Caring for someone with incontinence

This fact sheet has been developed to assist carers looking after someone with a bladder or bowel control problem, also known as incontinence. Incontinence is a common problem and many carers find themselves having to cope with the added workload associated with it. This fact sheet provides you with general information about managing incontinence and where to seek further information and advice.

What is incontinence?

Incontinence is a loss of bladder or bowel control that may result in involuntary leakage of urine or faeces. Urgency (needing to get the toilet in a hurry) and frequency (wanting to go to the toilet often) are also common bladder control problems, although they are not necessarily associated with leakage.

Who is at risk?

Incontinence is a common issue that affects nearly one in five Australians from all walks of life, regardless of their age or cultural background. Incontinence is not just a problem for older people or people with disability. Despite this, people from these two groups are at greater risk of developing bladder or bowel control problems, because of poor mobility (ability to get around), memory problems and chronic health problems such as Parkinson's disease, stroke, dementia and multiple sclerosis.

The most important thing to remember when caring for someone with incontinence is that it is not 'normal' or 'inevitable'. Options for preventing, treating, managing and curing incontinence are available, so it is very important to seek professional help as early as possible.

Where to seek help

If the person you are caring for is incontinent the most important step for you to take is to seek professional help. The National Continence Helpline 1800 33 00 66 is a free and confidential service available to anyone living in Australia. The helpline is staffed by Continence Nurse Advisors, who can provide you with practical information and advice including access to a wide range of information resources or details of a continence clinic located close to the person you are caring for.

Continence assessment

The first step required to affectively manage a person's incontinence is a continence assessment. A continence assessment helps identify the type and causes of the problems being experienced by the person and assists the continence advisor to devise an appropriate management strategy to treat these issues. There are a number of different types of incontinence and management of each of these different types varies.

A continence assessment will collect information about the person's bladder and bowel function including:

- how often they go to the toilet
- how much urine is passed
- what their bowel actions look like
- how often and how much they leak
- what their fluid and diet intake is
- what current medications they are on
- other health problems they experience; and
- their ability to perform self care tasks such as toileting, dressing, getting to and from the toilet.

A rectal or vaginal examination may also be required as part the assessment.

Management Options

There are a range of management options available to people with incontinence, which largely depend on the type of incontinence they have and outcomes they hope to achieve. An incontinence management plan will usually consist of several of the following options:

Caring for someone with incontinence

- adequate fluid intake (for example 1500 – 2000mls each day)
- adequate diet (for example a fibre rich diet to prevent constipation)
- a pelvic floor muscle exercise program
- a bladder retraining program
- a toileting program
- medication
- incontinence aids (for example, pads, condom drainage or catheters).

Practical tips whilst waiting for assistance

Bladder problems:

- Find a pad that will keep the person's clothing or bedding dry for about 3 to 6 hours.
- If the problem comes on suddenly, see your doctor to make sure it is not an infection.
- If the person suddenly CANNOT pass urine, see your doctor as this may be a medical emergency.
- Make sure the person is drinking adequate amounts of fluid - 1500 to 2000mls spread evenly through out the day.
- If the person is constipated, see your doctor about different treatment options, as constipation can impact bladder control.
- Seek professional help on the cause and treatment of the incontinence.

Bowel problems:

- Use a pad for protection.
- Use a barrier cream to protect the person's skin (bowel leakage can make skin red and sore very quickly).
- See your doctor if diarrhoea persists for more than 24 hours (the cause of the diarrhoea could be food poisoning, or certain kinds of medicine such as antibiotics).
- Wear disposable gloves (available from supermarkets or chemists) to protect yourself.
- Wash your hands carefully (even if you wear gloves) after you have had any contact with bodily fluids such as urine or faeces.
- If the person is constipated, see your doctor about different treatment options.

Resources

A resource that will help you with caring for someone with incontinence is 'Help for people who care for someone with bladder or bowel problems'. This easy to read booklet will provide you with practical tips about caring for a person with incontinence and is available free via the National Continence Helpline on 1800 33 00 66.

Carers and incontinence

Many carers find caring for a person with incontinence to be one of the most difficult aspects of caring. Incontinence can be unpredictable, add dramatically to your workload and be very costly. Many carers report feeling angry, frustrated, lonely, and not coping as they try to manage alone. It is not always easy to care for a person with incontinence, but the right advice and support from a health professional may make it more manageable for you.

Who to contact for information, advice and support

- The National Continence Helpline 1800 3300 66 - for information and advice about bladder and bowel control problems.
- State or territory Commonwealth Carers Resource Centres 1800 242 636 - for advice and support relating to caring.
- Carers Australia website www.carersaustralia.com.au - for links to state or territory Carers Associations.