

Caregiving and Incontinence: Caring for a Loved One with Incontinence

by Jane Hankenhof Curry, Gerontologist

Caring for a loved one can be a very rewarding experience. However, caregiving also has its challenging and stressful moments, especially when a loved one is incontinent. Providing for the personal care needs of someone with bladder or bowel control issues will always be an unwelcome task, but there are many effective solutions to managing incontinence that can result in increased dignity and improved quality of life for your loved ones, and less frustration and difficulty for you.

IT IS A MEDICAL CONDITION

- It is most important to note that incontinence, the loss of bladder or bowel control, is a medical condition and NOT a disease or a “normal” part of aging.
- It is estimated that 25 million or more individuals experience some degree of incontinence.
- Levels of incontinence can range from a “dribble” that follows laughter or lifting a heavy item to soaked clothing when the bathroom cannot be reached in time.
- Conditions associated with incontinence are as varied as the levels of incontinence. Those experiencing bladder control issues can be children with special needs, individuals who have had strokes, multiple sclerosis, prostate issues, spinal cord injury, dementia, or numerous other medical or mobility issues.

Incontinence is a subject that is not always easy to discuss with a loved one. Even if a caregiver discovers the “telltale signs” of urine odor, wet chair or bedding, or increased laundry needs it can still be considered “embarrassing” or “taboo” to bring the issue up in a discussion. However, since this is a medical condition with underlying causes, it is essential to discuss this with your loved one and then bring bladder control issues to the attention of a physician or medical professional. Technological advancements have provided numerous management and treatment options, and for some even a cure.

An assessment by a medical professional is the first step in determining the cause, type, and level of incontinence. This assessment may be done by a urologist who specializes in caring for individuals with urinary conditions.

5 TYPES OF INCONTINENCE

There are five common types of incontinence, which can be experienced either separately or in a variety of combinations.

1. **STRESS**
The leakage of a small amount of urine due to sudden pressure on the bladder experienced when laughing, coughing, exercising, or lifting a heavy object.
2. **URGE**
A sudden “urge” to urinate that is so strong that the bathroom cannot be reached in time.
3. **OVERFLOW**
When the bladder fills beyond capacity and urine spills. Women may also experience the feeling of never being able to empty the bladder.
4. **REFLEX**
An involuntary urination without any sensation of a full bladder. It is possible to be completely unaware of the need to urinate when this happens.
5. **FUNCTIONAL**
This results from surgery, restricted mobility, environmental barriers, medications, or mental disorders.

MANAGING AND LIVING WITH INCONTINENCE

Once the type or combinations of types, of incontinence are determined you are on the road to a successful treatment, cure or effective management of the condition. Diet modification, behavioral therapy, pelvic floor exercises, medications, supportive devices, surgery, and disposable absorbent products may be determined by your health care professional to best meet your loved one’s individualized needs.

With regard to disposable absorbent products, it is very important to note that not all disposable products are created equal. Low performance products comprised of cotton fluff or feminine hygiene products are not effective in the management of incontinence. Specialty bladder control products that contain super absorbent polymers offer the highest level of performance and will quickly absorb and neutralize urine.

High performance products can retain large volumes of urine, prevent leakage, control bacterial growth, and eliminate odor. In addition they can offer a cost-saving advantage (because you do not need to use as many). Using the most appropriate products can provide for uninterrupted sleep and will improve the quality of life for those who are incontinent which can mean a more pleasant caregiving experience.

If you are interested in learning more about incontinence or caregiving, there are many professional organizations, web sites, support groups and educational materials to assist you in your quest including:

- **National Family Caregivers Association (NFCA)** educates, supports, empowers and speaks up for caregivers. Find them on the web at www.nfcacares.org or 800-896-3650.
- **National Association for Continence (NAFC)** dedicated to improving the quality of life of people with incontinence. Find them on the web at www.nafc.org or 800-BLADDER.
- **Bladder Health Council of the American Foundation for Urologic Disease (AFUD)** educating the general public and healthcare providers about bladder diseases and condition. Find them on the web at www.afud.org or 800-242-2383.
- **Tranquility Incontinence Products**, manufacturer of high performance disposable incontinence products, and providing product information and resources as well as confidential personal assessments over the phone, toll free at **800-467-3224** or www.tranquilityproducts.com

Jane Hankenhof Curry, BS Gerontology is the Education and Market Development Coordinator for Principle Business Enterprises, Inc. of Dunbridge, Ohio and can be reached at 1-800-467-3224 ext. #223. PBE is the manufacturer of Tranquility, a full line of high performance incontinence products, and can be found on the web at www.tranquilityproducts.com.