

## Skin Damage from Incontinence



Urine or feces can damage skin if not immediately removed and the affected area thoroughly cleaned and dried.

Irritating substances in feces cause inflammation of the skin; repeated or prolonged wetness from leaked urine causes skin cells to gain water and swell. Leaking urine and feces together causes more damage than either one alone.

Wearing an absorbent brief or pad for prolonged periods makes the skin prone to damage. Think about how the skin looks after an adhesive bandage (e.g., Band-Aid®) is removed: pale, wrinkled, moist and thin. Incontinence briefs and pads have a similar effect on the skin because they keep air from circulating to the covered areas and drying them. This also creates an ideal environment for certain types of bacteria or fungi to grow, causing a rash or infection.

The skin damage of inflammation appears as redness that can vary in shade from light pink to brown-red. In darker-toned skin, inflammation may appear as redness or as patches of darker or lighter coloring. Damaged skin may also look shiny and wet, with local swelling or fluid buildup. In cases of more severe damage, the top layer of skin can wear away, exposing the skin underneath to the effects of the urine or feces. With the top layer of skin gone, bacteria or fungi can more easily invade the underlying tissues, causing a rash. If damage to skin goes untreated, it can worsen to become an open wound.

Damaged skin may cause soreness, pain, burning or itching. Although some people with Alzheimer's disease or dementia may not complain about these symptoms, they may show other signs of discomfort (e.g., tugging at their clothes, scratching, squirming, wincing or grimacing when they sit down). Even people who show no obvious signs of discomfort may be very uncomfortable.

### Prevention and treatment

Skin damage from prolonged exposure to urine or feces can occur fast — within just a few days. Fortunately, if it is quickly and appropriately treated, it can get better quickly. What's more, skin damage can be prevented by closely following this routine:

- Inspect skin exposed to leaked urine and feces regularly for redness or worn skin. It may be easiest to do this while helping your relative bathe or get dressed or while they are sleeping.
- Gently clean and dry the skin with a soft, non-irritating cloth as soon as possible after it is wet or soiled. Cleansing and drying the skin as soon as possible after it is soiled with urine or feces is critical for preventing damage or helping healing of already damaged skin. Don't use soap, which can dry out the skin. Instead, use a

mild cleanser that says it is “pH balanced” on the label. Many of these gentle cleansers do not require the use of water, making them very convenient. Some products also combine a cleanser and a protective cream so you can clean and protect in one step.

- If you use disposable cleansing wipes that contain a moisturizer or a protectant, be aware that the amount of protectant that remains on the skin from these wipes may work well for prevention and treatment of minor skin damage but are not enough for treatment of more severe damage.

After patting the skin dry, apply a protectant (e.g., ointment or cream) as a barrier against moisture and other irritants. Apply it to the genitals, on and between the buttocks and on the inner thighs. Several kinds of products are available to prevent skin damage and promote healing. Look for these active ingredients on the label: petrolatum, dimethicone or zinc oxide. Examples include A+D® Ointment, petroleum jelly (e.g., Vaseline®) or zinc oxide skin protectant (many generics and brand names). A clear, non-stinging acrylic film (e.g., 3M™ Cavilon™ No Sting Barrier Film or Spray) may also be used.

- Many of the same products can be used for both prevention and treatment of skin damage, however a greater amount of some active ingredients in a product makes a products better for treatment. Products containing zinc oxide or the non-stinging acrylic promote healing.
- Remove the protective ointment and reapply it after each cleansing. If removal or application is difficult, you can try applying an acrylic film, which does not need to be applied as often because it stays on the skin for several washings. Acrylic film may need to be used only once a day or once every other day. Keeping a regular schedule of application is a good idea.
- If skin is dry and your cleanser or protectant does not contain a moisturizer, you can apply a moisturizer before applying the protectant. Dry, cracked skin is more prone to bacteria. Some products contain a cleanser, moisturizer and protectant altogether.
- Don't apply baby powder because it raises the pH of the area, enabling fungus and bacteria to more easily grow.
- If your relative's skin is severely inflamed, an open wound has formed or you feel you can no longer manage it, contact his or her health care provider immediately.