

Talking to Your Loved One's Health Care Provider about Incontinence



Many people with Alzheimer's disease or dementia experience incontinence or accidental leakage of urine or feces at some time during the course of the disease. It often occurs in the later stages, but the timing varies from person to person.

Although incontinence can be an uncomfortable subject to discuss, your loved one's health care provider needs to know about it because it provides important information about your relative's condition. It will also help insure that your loved one gets appropriate care; although incontinence cannot be cured, it can be managed. Good management can help prevent the skin problems often associated with incontinence.

Your relative may not want to discuss their incontinence because they are embarrassed or do not want to be seen as incapable. They may also feel it is not really a problem because it involves only small amounts of leakage or does not always happen.

Likewise, some caregivers may feel uncomfortable discussing incontinence with a health care provider in front of their loved one. If you are worried that such a discussion would upset your relative, talk to the health care provider before the visit. Don't wait for the provider to bring up the subject; there is no "set" time to discuss incontinence.

Talking with a health care provider can help your relative view incontinence as part of a disease process rather than a behavioral issue that they can control. Your relative may also better accept an incontinence management plan endorsed by their health care provider.

If you aren't sure how to describe your relative's incontinence in appropriate medical terms, just describe the situation in your own words. For example, soiling underwear in between bowel movements is not the same thing as having diarrhea, even though the two problems may be related.

Talk to your relative's health care provider if you notice changes in the severity of the incontinence or the appearance of skin problems. Also feel free to talk to your health care provider if you need assistance in managing these problems.

If your relative does not have incontinence but you want information on what to expect during the course of the disease, ask your relative's health care provider for information. Anticipating potential problems can help reduce worry and help you plan how to manage if problems occur.

"The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place"

~George Bernard Shaw