

## Senior Hygiene & Personal Care

Helping seniors with personal care can be an emotionally and physically challenging task for caregivers. However, there are some ways to lighten the load. Here are five invaluable tips designed to help caregivers manage personal care and hygiene tasks while best supporting the dignity, independence and overall quality of life of aging loved ones:

### 1. Create a Comfortable Environment

While the task of helping a loved one bathe, dress or use the bathroom can be heartbreaking for caregivers, it can be equally stressful for those receiving the care. Creating as peaceful an environment as possible can help alleviate embarrassment and promote feelings of calm and well-being. Gentle lighting and tranquil music can simultaneously soothe and distract.

### 2. Follow Their Lead and Needs

Many older adults become set in their ways. While you may have particular bathing habits and/or a preferred schedule, acknowledging the needs and preferences of your aging loved one can help make the task more agreeable. For example, seniors who are not physically active may require full bathing just a few times a week and sponge-bathing on other days. Or perhaps your aging loved one prefers to shower at night as opposed to in the morning. Agreeing upon a schedule in advance can help you best fulfill his/her individual needs while simultaneously supporting a feeling of control.

### 3. Support Their Independence

Helping older adults remain involved in self-care for as long as they are able is vital to facilitating ongoing independence. Various types of adaptive equipment can make bathing and grooming-related tasks easier for aging hands. Additionally, safety equipment such as non-slip adhesives on the floor, grab bars in the tub and by the toilet can help seniors get in and out of the bathroom with minimal assistance and increase peace of mind for you both. If you're not sure about independence-supporting modifications in the home, a consultation with an occupational therapist (OT) can offer invaluable insights.

#### **4. Minimize Discomfort**

While some degree of anxiety is natural when helping others with personal care and hygiene tasks, it is possible to reduce awkwardness by planning ahead. Something as simple as ensuring that the room and water are at the proper temperatures can reduce apprehension, while having a warm towel available and ready following a shower or bath goes a long way toward honoring modesty. Casual conversation about unrelated topics, meanwhile, is another way to defuse tension. Remember: Your aging loved one is attuned to your body language and emotions. The more comfortable you appear to be throughout these tasks, the more comfortable they will be, as well.

#### **5. Use Your Resources**

While caregiving can sometimes feel extremely isolating, the truth is that you're far from alone. In fact, millions of caregivers all over the country are experiencing the same challenges that you are. Joining a support group or online forum not only offers invaluable fellowship but can also yield helpful suggestions from others facing the same struggles.

If these tasks do become insurmountable, consider hiring a private-duty caregiver for assistance.

One last thing to keep in mind: The more you learn about best practices and coping techniques for hygiene, personal care and other caregiving tasks, including everything from how to transfer someone from a wheelchair to a toilet seat to perineal care tips, the more prepared you'll be to face these tasks with knowledge, confidence and strength.

#### **Assisting with Perineal Care**

While peri-care can initially be intimidating, it is a very important part of the private caregiver/patient relationship. Here's a closer look at the importance of perineal care, as well as how to perform this critical duty to ensure the ongoing health of your loved one.

#### **Why Peri-Care Is Important**

Peri-care – also known as perineal care – involves cleaning the private areas of a patient. Because this area is prone to infection, it must be cleaned at least daily, and more if your loved one suffers from incontinence. Typical times to perform

peri-care include as part of daily bathing, after the use of the bedpan, and following episodes of incontinence.

Regular peri-care can not only minimize odors, it can also help prevent urinary tract, bladder and kidney infections.

Thoroughly wash your hands and don gloves before beginning any peri-care regimen.

When your hands are clean and you're ready to start, ask your patient to separate his/her legs. If patients are unable, caregivers will need to offer gentle help. Keep your loved one's body covered to prevent unnecessary exposure and help promote a sense of dignity.

One of the most important aspects of peri-care is checking for signs of infection. These include swelling, lesions, rashes, sores and boils. These symptoms can lead to serious conditions if not recognized and treated. If you do notice these warning signs, contact your loved one's health care provider.

Moving from front to back, use warm water and a clean washcloth (or disposable wipes) to clean the perineal area. For females, this involves cleaning the inner legs, labia and groin area, while for men it requires cleaning the tip and shaft of the penis, along with the scrotum. Both men and women require cleaning of the anal area, which will involve turning the patient on his/her side.

If possible, use a fresh wipe for each "swipe." If using a washcloth, use a clean area of the cloth for each motion, and never move from back to front as this can spread germs and cause urinary tract infection. Have several washcloths handy just in case you need more than one.

If your loved one has a foley catheter, wipe around and down the tubing, but avoid tugging on the foley as this can be painful and harmful.

When you are finished and the entire perineal area is clean, make sure to thoroughly dry each area as excess moisture can lead to chapping and bed sores. Moisturizers and creams can help protect this delicate area. Always be gentle, as this area of the body is sensitive.

Occasionally bed linens will become soiled during perineal care. If so, remove them and launder them along with the washcloth. A waterproof pad placed under the buttocks, meanwhile, can be a moisture barrier between your loved one and the bed linens.

Remember: the more comfortable you feel with this task, the more comfortable your loved one will feel. Conversely, if you treat peri-care awkwardly or with disdain, your loved one's discomfort will be amplified. Maintain a pleasant demeanor and be sure to explain what you're doing every step of the way.