

WHEN TOILETING BECOMES A CHALLENGE: TIPS AND STRATEGIES

Consider the person's overall health and abilities:

- Could there be other medical problems besides the dementia that should be treated, such as a bladder infection, constipation, loss of bladder tone, weakening of control muscles, decreased bladder capacity or prostate problems for men?
- Is the person taking medication or drinking a large amount of liquids which may be contributing to a frequent need to go to the bathroom? Drinking a large amount of tea or coffee may make the person feel an urgency to go to the bathroom.
- Is urine being released with the pressure of a sneeze, cough or laugh?
- Can the person communicate the need to go to the toilet?
- Does the person understand the body's message that it is time to go to the toilet?
- Can the person find the bathroom?
- Are other objects being mistaken for a toilet, such as a garbage can?
- Does the person's confusion increase at night, requiring an adaptation to the environment, such as a night light?
- Can the person pull their clothing down, wipe properly, put their clothing back on and wash their hands after toileting?
- Is it difficult for the person to get up from a low bed or a deep chair?
- Is the person able to undress in time to go to the toilet?
- Is going to the toilet too complicated? Is the person able to go through all the steps that are needed (finding the toilet, undressing, turning around or sitting down on the toilet, etc.)?

Helpful tips:

- Make an appointment for the person with dementia to have a full medical assessment to rule out infections, treatable conditions and to review medications.
- Make the toilet easy to find: clearly mark the path on walls and/or floors; ensure that there are no obstacles; label bathroom doors with words or a picture of a toilet.
- Use a contrasting coloured toilet seat. Coloured tape around the perimeter of a toilet or coloured water may prevent accidental misses due to perceptual or visual losses.
- Put lids on waste paper baskets and other containers that may be mistaken for toilets.
- Watch for visible cues that the person needs to use the bathroom. For example, the person may get restless, make unusual sounds or faces, or pace around the room.
- Give the person reminders to go to the toilet regularly, perhaps every two hours or before going out.
- Direct the individual to the front of the toilet before removing clothes.

Helpful tips, continued:

- ✓ Choose easy-to-remove clothing, such as velcro closings or elastic waists.
- ✓ For men, try putting a decal inside the toilet bowl to have something to “aim at.”
- ✓ Give a cue to get started, such as running water, prompting, or demonstrating what to do.
- ✓ Hand the person toilet paper to use as needed. You may need to help the person get started with wiping. Using wipes can be easier than toilet paper if you need to wipe for them. Remember to have disposable gloves on hand.
- ✓ Give the person some privacy, but stay nearby. Explain that you are “just outside the door if anything is needed.”
- ✓ If you leave the person alone in the washroom, make sure that there are no medications or dangerous objects that the person could have access to.
- ✓ Install hand rails beside the toilet, and a raised toilet seat to make sitting down and getting up easier.
- ✓ Consider removing any door locks as the person may not be able to unlock the door without assistance.
- ✓ Distract the person if staying seated is a problem by playing music or providing a favourite item to look at or hold, like a book or a magazine.
- ✓ Provide good lighting by ensuring that the bathrooms and hallways are well lit.
- ✓ Use a commode or a urinal in the bathroom.
- ✓ If accidents happen during the night, consider having a commode in the bedroom. It is important to keep the person dry and clean. If accidents continue to occur, products such as disposable underwear, panty liners (for women) or protective bedding might be helpful. Use them only if necessary.
- ✓ Unless it is necessary, do not wake up the person during the night. If needed, have the person use a good disposable, absorbent brief.
- ✓ Toilet the person regularly throughout the day (approximately every 2 hours).
- ✓ Watch for redness or skin breakdown of the buttocks. Contact a nurse or doctor to treat this right away.
- ✓ Accidents may happen. Remain calm and try to overcome any embarrassment the person may feel. Remember that this is as hard for the person living with dementia as it is for you.

Connect with the staff at the Alzheimer Society of Toronto for more information and support. Visit www.alz.to

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