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INCONTINENCE AND DEMENTIA

REDATTO DA DOTT. DAVIDE GALLO

Incontinence is a common, and often distressing, symptom of dementia for both the person with the illness and their caregiver. It's often difficult to talk about, but it's crucial to understand that it is **not an intentional behavior**. With the right support and strategies, incontinence can be managed and, in some cases, prevented, preserving the person's dignity.

Understanding the Causes and Maintaining Dignity

Incontinence doesn't have a single cause, but rather stems from a combination of factors, both medical and related to dementia itself.

Medical causes (often treatable):

- **Urinary tract infections (UTIs):** Bacteria can cause a sudden and painful urge to urinate. UTIs are treatable with antibiotics.
- **Constipation:** A full bowel can make it difficult to control the bladder and cause fecal leakage.
- **Prostate problems (in men):** These can affect urination.
- **Side effects of medications:** Some medications or diuretic beverages (coffee, tea) can increase urination.
- **Other conditions:** Diabetes, stroke, or muscle disorders (e.g., Parkinson's).

Dementia-related causes:

- **Difficulty recognizing the urge:** The brain doesn't correctly interpret signals from a full bladder or bowel.
- **Disorientation:** Not being able to find or recognize the bathroom, or mistaking other places for the toilet.
- **Mobility problems:** Not being able to get to the bathroom in time.
- **Practical difficulties:** Forgetting how to unbutton clothes.
- **Embarrassment or refusal:** Not wanting to use the bathroom or refusing help out of embarrassment or confusion.

How to Deal with the Situation

Your attitude is of the utmost importance. The caregiver's reaction can make the difference between an episode of discomfort and emotional trauma.

- **Stay calm:** Do not scold or make the person feel guilty. Incontinence is a consequence of the illness.
- **Preserve dignity:** Reassure them by saying that "it happens to everyone." Don't emphasize what happened and, if necessary, talk to other caregivers to manage your own discomfort.
- **Ensure hygiene:** To prevent skin irritation and infections, make sure the person washes and dries themselves thoroughly after an incident. Use warm water and soap, and clean clothing. If sores appear, consult a doctor immediately.
- **Control the environment:** Keep the house well-ventilated and don't be embarrassed if a slight odor persists. You've done your best.

Prevention, Management, and Aids

Practical strategies to prevent or limit the consequences.

- **Consult a doctor:** First of all, see the doctor to determine if the cause is treatable. Be prepared to answer questions about frequency and habits.
- **Establish a routine:** Note when the person goes to the bathroom to understand their rhythms. Developing a routine can help; for example, accompanying them to the bathroom at regular times: upon waking, every two hours, after meals, and before sleeping.
- **Make the bathroom accessible and safe:**

1. Make the bathroom easily identifiable: leave the door open, put up a picture, or paint it a contrasting color.
2. Eliminate obstacles and ensure adequate lighting, even at night.
3. Install support bars and a raised toilet seat for greater safety.
4. For men, coloring the toilet water can help make it more visible.

- **Manage hydration:** Make sure the person drinks enough water during the day (about 1.5 liters), but limit fluid intake in the last hour before going to bed, especially diuretic beverages.
- **Choose the right clothing:** Prefer clothes that are easy to take off and don't hinder the person in case of an urgent need.
- **Protect furniture:** Use waterproof covers for mattresses and pillows, and protective covers for sofas and armchairs. If incontinence is frequent, consider replacing carpets with floors that are easier to clean (vinyl or linoleum).

Aids and Absorbent Products

When the problem worsens, the use of aids can improve everyone's quality of life.

- **Absorbent products:** These are a solution for both you and the person, making the problem less visible and more hygienic. Approach the topic with tact and choose the right size for comfort.
- **Other aids:** A urinal or a commode can be useful, especially at night. In specific cases, the doctor may recommend external urinary devices or catheters, but these must be applied by a healthcare professional.

Always discuss with your doctor to evaluate the best solution, and don't hesitate to ask for support from other caregivers to share experiences and advice.

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The information in these fact sheets is not a substitute for professional medical advice. We always recommend that you consult with experts in the field.