
Managing Bowel Incontinence

What is bowel incontinence?

- Not being able to control a bowel movement from the rectum
- Bowel incontinence has many causes. Some of these include:
 - Weakness of the anal muscle
 - Dementia or mobility related
 - Nervous system disorders
 - Mental confusion
- Other factors include:
 - Long-term use of laxatives
 - Not enough fluid intake
 - Lack of exercise
 - Hemorrhoids
 - Sedation
 - Very hard stool
- Severe constipation may lead to leakage from the rectum

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Losing control of a bowel movement
- Blockage of bowel contents. Symptoms may include:
 - Nonstop oozing of loose stools
 - Loss of appetite
 - Cramping

What to report to the hospice/palliative care team?

- Color, looseness and odor of the stool
- Abdominal discomfort, cramping or bloating
- Medications and diet history
- Changes in activity level
- Skin problems of the affected area
- Patient and caregiver's thoughts

What can be done for bowel incontinence?

- Know the person's bowel history. Know the usual routine. Time of day, following a meal, etc.
- Plan a bowel retraining program that is easy and fits into the person's lifestyle – your nurse can help with this
- Take in enough fluids and fiber if possible
- Provide ample time and privacy during toileting
- Keep skin clean and dry to prevent break down and odors. Avoid baby powder and cornstarch – use protective barrier creams
- Wear loose fitting clothing to allow for air flow
- Control odors with fresh air and room deodorizers
- Wear protective garments
- Avoid foods that act as laxatives. These include caffeine, alcohol, diet soda or artificial sweeteners
- Talk to your nurse for additional information

Other HPNA Teaching Sheets on are available at www.HPNA.org.

Reference

Core Curriculum for the Generalist Hospice and Palliative Nurse. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company; 2010.

Bates-Jensen BM. Skin disorders: pressure ulcers – assessment and management. In: Ferrell BR, Coyle N, eds. *Textbook of Palliative Nursing*. 2nd Ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2006: 301-328.

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Approved by the HPNA Education Committee September 2007,
reviewed by the HPNA Education Services Committee, May 2011