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AALNA Section

## Incontinence: A root cause of incidences assisted living nurses try to prevent

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An estimated 25 million people in the United States are affected by incontinence challenges, increasing over time due to age, pelvic issues, bladder and prostate health as well as chronic conditions. Incontinence can result in several consequences in assisted living communities. However, with effective nursing protocols and absorbent product choices, negative outcomes of incontinence can be minimized, allowing for better incontinence outcomes and quality of life of residents. The key is to keep the skin as dry as possible, always. With the appropriate products, protocols and education, the residents of an assisted living community will thrive with improved health, dignity, independence and social engagement. All of these factors lead to a happier, positive community environment. With the high-quality products and expertise available today, assisted living communities can implement a cost effective, robust total incontinence management program where residents thrive and employees are educated and empowered. This focus may help significantly reduce complications, incidents and events Assisted Living nurses try to prevent.

Incontinence is the involuntary loss of bladder or bowel control and occurs prevalently in aging adults. Why does incontinence occur in aging adults? Strokes, Dementia/Alzheimer's Disease, neurological or musculoskeletal conditions, pelvic floor atrophy in women commonly caused by pregnancy, bladder or sphincter dysfunction or a combination of both, UTI's/Bladder infections, diabetes, reduced mobility, a long history of poor bladder habits, poor eyesight, poor dexterity, unwillingness to toilet because of depression, anxiety or anger, obesity, inadequate fiber and water intake. Age and lifestyle habits lead to these incontinence risk factors. Such risk factors more commonly than others, can play a significant role for incontinence and cause adverse negative outcomes for residents.

Many skin functions deteriorate with aging skin and loss of skin integrity, making the skin vulnerable to infections. The loss of elastin and collagen networks result in skin that is less stretchable, less resilient, more lax and prone to wrinkling and breakage, increasing risk for pressure sores and poor wound-healing.<sup>1</sup> Even if a wound were to heal, wounded skin never completely regains the tensile strength of healthy, intact skin.<sup>5</sup> Skin rashes, IAD (Incontinence-Associated Dermatitis) can develop, causing skin to have micro breaks allowing for bacteria, fungus and infections to infiltrate the area and in time the entire body. Malnutrition including hydration, poor circulation and oxygen intake impact the fragility of the

skin.<sup>11</sup> Good nutrition will help make skin more resistant to breakdown and skin will be more likely to heal and fight off infection should it occur.

Approximately 50% of people with UI or FI are affected by Incontinence Associated Dermatitis (IAD). Damp or wet skin results in a higher coefficient of friction and greater risk of abrasion when the skin is exposed to shear force.<sup>1</sup> Urine and feces contain a variety of chemical irritants, a higher pH level, as well as moisture. Penetration into the skin lead to skin infections such as IAD.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, fungal infections can be difficult to treat and can cause permanent damage to skin over time. A higher pH level environment may be prevented with a booster pad because it will help prevent the liquid from mixing with the fecal matter therefore not activating the enzymes.

"Wet comfort" is phrase used by incontinent people to describe how they feel when the pads they are wearing are wet and they continue to wear them.<sup>3</sup> Poor "wet comfort" equates with the failure of the pad to keep skin dry. Wet comfort is an area of care where residents and caregivers should never compromise. Several cost-effective solutions exist that help prevent wet comfort. Wetness causes bacterial overgrowth and contact with the urethra, leading to UTI's or bladder infections. Often, due to wet comfort, residents don't realize the degree to which they are wet and if they suffer from memory or musculoskeletal disease, they have limited self-awareness for the severity of wetness to alert caregivers. Wet comfort is an important area of incontinence; however, fecal incontinence is also prevalent, thus leading to many skin compromises. There is a 10% prevalence of individuals with Fecal Incontinence (FI).<sup>4</sup> Fecal Incontinence can be described as involuntary leakage of stool. Very few absorbent products are specifically designed to absorb stool and little is known about product use among individuals with FI.<sup>4</sup> Unlike urine, which is entirely liquid, fecal leakage has a mixed consistency containing solid and liquid, which adds complexity to the requirements of absorbent products. Fecal material is highly irritating to skin.<sup>6</sup>

Several complications can arise from fecal matter in contact with skin and residents should be changed immediately. Even worse, the mixture of urine and fecal matter can result in a caustic environment, resulting in multiple issues, such as skin infections and UTI's/Bladder infections. Highly absorbent products may absorb the urine, minimizing the caustic urine/fecal mixture. FI can have a large impact on an individual's life where 39% stated that they would avoid some activities.<sup>4</sup> Several different types of products were found acceptable by users such as insert pads, diapers, pull-ups, T shaped pads, and washable diapers. There is a perceived need for even greater absorption when stool is liquid. Because

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one third of individuals with fecal incontinence also had urinary incontinence, a product or system would be useful and helpful. Booster pads can be a useful aid in these situations, since they are inexpensive and can be changed frequently without discarding the larger product.

Leakage and odor are outcomes which can lead to psychological effects such as depression, anxiety, anger, negative attitude or mood. The implications of these psychological effects lead to limited desire of social engagement due to fear of being wet or emitting odor. Dementia/Alzheimer's Disease can cause confusion and mobility impairment can make toileting very difficult. Being awoken for toileting can disrupt the sleeping pattern, causing sleep fragmentation. Evidence suggests residents experience much sleep fragmentation and the nursing care practices related to continence care during the night are responsible for a substantial component of the sleep fragmentation (Fader, 2003).<sup>7</sup> This affects the attitude/mood of the residents as well as increase the risk of falls from feeling disoriented, leading to the possibility of hip fractures and hospitalization. Many of these are codependent, where one outcome can lead to another. Fortunately, these implications can be helped with a proper incontinence care protocol and education that incontinence is one of the root causes of negative outcomes which may be prevented.

The components of a great total incontinence care protocol are excellent products, valuable education, and experts on demand. To do so, an incontinence care program using the right products with high absorbency and wicking properties helps reduce leaks and odors, curtail wetness and keep the skin dry to minimize skin infections. Both absorbency and softness of products promote comfort and prevent unnecessary changes, especially at night. This allows the resident to sleep better, improving cognition and lessening agitation and permits caregivers to have more time for care giving. With more absorbent products, caregivers can spend less time changing bedding due to leaks, allowing them to have more time to spend with residents to promote an active lifestyle and improve the state of mental health, ultimately combatting many of the risk factors for incontinence.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, the positive outcomes of a good incontinence care promote social engagement among residents as well as help manage residents' stress, anxiety, agitation, and anger. It also helps reduce the risk of skin breakdown, promotes a better night sleep, improves mental health and dignity and risk reduction of falls.<sup>12</sup> Even when UI cannot be completely cured, it can always be controlled with products, skin care regimens, occlusive or drainage devices and toileting equipment to ensure optimal skin integrity, odorless urine containment, social independence, comfort, and freedom of movement.<sup>10</sup>

There are four factors to consider when choosing the right absorbent products; proper fit, proper type, proper amount and proper changing times. With good knowledge and expertise help, these factors can be assessed to devise a unique program for assisted living communities. Proper fit allows reduction in skin irritation, less leakage and maximum absorbency allowing for less changing of clothing and bedding. In addition to the benefits of proper fit, the proper type of product will ensure that the right product is chosen for the level of incontinence. This will help determine the proper amount of product needed for the community to prevent overuse. Proper changing times allow for routine changes and prevent the possibility of overloading caregivers schedule as well as protect the skin from overexposure to body fluids. Booster pads reduce leakage and odor and can be changed frequently without changing the larger products. An appropriate incontinence product is one that ensures skin integrity is maintained.<sup>5</sup> There is no simple answer to the best product or products for continence, yet, choosing the best product is of utmost importance for the individuals' well-being.<sup>9</sup>

Feeling drier impacts the attitude and mood of residents and helps preserve dignity of residents allowing them to thrive. Often, residents have no control, but as caregivers with the right knowledge, products and education, we can control and minimize the effects on the skin, dignity, confidence and quality of life. Additionally, a total incontinence program does not have to be more expensive to the residents, family, or the community. Through education, and working directly with manufacturers and their experts, assisted living communities can often implement a better program at a lower cost, adding value to all stakeholders including residents, families, caregivers and the community.

Urinary Incontinence often starts in the AL environment. Be aware of your residents' needs and start to implement incontinence programs through root cause analysis, investigation into available products, effective toileting programs, skin care, etc. when your resident is only "occasionally incontinent" thereby potentially preventing total incontinence. There is a huge opportunity for AL nurses to improve residents' quality of life by providing appropriate and effective analysis and interventions for all of your residents with incontinence issues. Dr. Ara Sayabalian, Ed.D. and his team specialize in implementing total incontinence care programs for assisted living communities. The focus of the programs revolve around risk reduction, caregiver education, and cost control. For questions, Dr. Sayabalian can be reached at drara@sayabalian.com.

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