



# Living in a Care Home

## Continence care

---

### **A common problem?**

One of the most common complaints made about care homes from those who visit – professionals and families – concerns unpleasant smells. And few things alarm visitors more than seeing a frail resident's request for help to the toilet being ignored. Low expectations leads to acceptance of what is intolerable. But incontinence can be managed. Smells, residents sitting in dirty underwear and regimented toileting should not be tolerated and a good care home will have plans in place to promote continence amongst its residents.

### **Dignity denied**

Many residents, perhaps a majority, have some difficulty getting to and using the toilet. Smells may arise from 'accidents' and the steps taken to deal with them and in some cases may be a direct result of the time taken to respond to requests for help. Many residents wear incontinence pads but pads should be used to avoid accidents rather than as an alternative to helping a resident to the toilet.

Not all occasions when residents soil or wet themselves can or should be attributed to poor practice or abusive behaviour on the part of care staff. However, there is no denying that many accidents could be avoided and how a home plans to look after residents with continence problems can be a clear indicator of the quality of care offered at the home. For example incontinence pads should be part of a planned response to an individual personal situation and should not be used as an easy option in the face of an inconvenient problem.

### **Some common causes**

Incontinence is a symptom not a disease and difficulties around continence are not an inevitable result of ageing. Incontinence can have a number of causes that should be investigated. In many cases continence problems do not have a physical cause. Rather they may be due to difficulties finding, reaching or using the toilet made more awkward because of mobility or cognitive problems, or confusion caused by dementia. Clear signs, accessible toilets and

clothing that is easy to remove all have a part to play in promoting continence among residents.

### **Dementia and incontinence**

Even if a resident is unable to indicate that they need to use the toilet, careful observation and planning can help the staff to get to know the resident's routine. While it is not easy, it is not impossible to help a resident with dementia to stay continent.

### **Simple steps**

There are some simple rules that homes should be using that may help you judge if continence care is being treated seriously:

- Requesting assistance to use the toilet should generally be seen as needing an immediate or early response
- Telling someone to wait should not be seen as a reasonable response and telling them to wait because they are wearing an incontinence pad is no more dignified than to ask the same of someone wearing standard underwear
- Leaving someone in wet or soiled clothing or pad is unacceptable and should not be tolerated
- Discussion of either the problem or anything that could have been done by either the carer or the resident to avoid the accident should happen in private