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Talking to Your Loved One About Continence Problems

Incontinence is a common problem for seniors, with the US Centers for Disease Control estimating that 1 in 2 North Americans over the age of 65 are managing daily continence problems.

With 50-50 odds like that, it shouldn't be a big surprise if you discover that your parents are experiencing incontinence. It could be a recent development or something that's been happening quietly for many months or years, but whatever the timeline, if it's reached a point where it's impacting your parents' health or their lifestyle, it could be time to talk to them and try to help.

Identifying the Problem

Incontinence is a touchy subject, and very few people are comfortable reaching out to family for help. Obviously, if they have, great! You can skip this section.

But if not, one of the first things you can do is simply take stock of your parent's environment. Here are some things you could observe that might mean your parent is struggling to manage incontinence:

- A urine scent in living rooms or bedrooms.
- A favourite chair has been covered with a protective cover, or has been replaced entirely.
- Bath mats in the washrooms or area rugs outside of washrooms have disappeared.
- Heavily-soiled clothing in the laundry basket or secreted away in cupboards or closets (particularly if your parent is experiencing any level of dementia).
- Multiple hand-washed undergarments drying in the bathroom.
- New stains on carpets or furniture.
- Evidence of several recent scrubblings on upholstered furniture.
- New packages of feminine hygiene products in the bathroom or bedroom (either for men, or for women who have passed menopause).



Get Prepared with Information

Your first instinct might be to immediately say something to your Mom or Dad.

But before you say, “Great dinner, Mom, and by the way when did you first starting having bladder leaks?” it’s important to know a little bit about incontinence and potential solutions for your parent.

Fortunately, we put together everything you need to know in one short webpage at

www.healthwick.ca/pages/managing-incontinence

It won’t take more than 10 minutes to read and it’ll give you an exact, step-by-step guide to managing incontinence, including an overview of common products on the market.

Talking it Out

If you have siblings, it might be worth involving them at this point, to let them know you’re about to have an important health conversation with your parent. If you think your parent might bring it up with your siblings, it’s important that they have a heads up.

It could be as simple as “When I was at Mom’s house, I noticed she might be having some trouble with incontinence. I’m going to give her a call this week and see if we can help.”



To talk to you parent, it’s often best to do it privately, in a quiet setting when you know you’re not likely to be interrupted for 10 minutes. Your goal should be to be direct but compassionate and understanding that this could be embarrassing on both sides.

Conversation starters might include:

“Dad, I don’t want to pry, but I noticed a box of maxi pads in the bathroom. Are you having trouble getting to the washroom?”

“Mom, this is kind of embarrassing, but there’s a urine smell in the bedroom. Should we talk to the doctor and see what’s going on?”

“Grandma, this might make you uncomfortable, but I found some of your soiled laundry in the cupboard. I’m worried and I’d like to help.”

Overcoming Objections

Sometimes, a person who has been managing incontinence for a while is happy when you bring up the subject. They may feel relieved that it's out in the open and appreciate that you're trying to help. If that's the case, great! Your next step should be to book an appointment with the doctor, and maybe order some incontinence product samples for your parent to try.

More commonly, though, a person who is managing incontinence isn't going to want to talk about it or will put up objections to taking any steps. Here are some common objections you might hear, and some ideas on how to overcome them:

If they say...	You might say...
"I don't want to talk about it."	"I'm sorry, I don't want to embarrass you. But I'm worried about you. I've been doing some research and I think I can help. Can I tell you what I've learned so far?"
"It's not a big deal. I've been living with it for years."	"I'm sure it's nothing serious and it IS a pretty common problem, but I think it's worth talking to the doctor and maybe getting samples of products for you to try."
"You're invading my privacy."	"I really don't want to make you uncomfortable, and I know you want to manage this on your own, but I wish you would let me help. Can I take you to the doctor's next week so you can talk to her?"
"This is none of your business."	"I'm just as uncomfortable as you, but I love you and I can't ignore the problem, especially when it comes to your health. Can we compromise? I'll order you some samples of products to try on your own?"
"I do NOT need to wear diapers"	"Of course not. But I think we both know that you do need something. There are pads specifically designed for this. Can I order some samples for you to try and see what you think?"
"You don't have to worry about me."	"I appreciate that, I really do, but I did notice [reiterate your previous observation], so I did some research about new products you maybe haven't tried. Can I tell you about them?"
"I can't afford those products."	"I'm sure it's expensive for you to constantly be doing laundry or changing the bed the way things are right now. Why don't we talk to the doctor to see if there's anything he could suggest, and buy some inexpensive pads in the meantime?"
"I'd die of embarrassment if someone saw me buying those products!"	"I'd be embarrassed too, but I did find a Canadian company that mails them to you in plain boxes, Maybe we should order some samples?"

If your parent pushes back or is highly resistant to talking, it might not be the right time to discuss the problem. Rather than escalate the conversation to something unpleasant, consider stepping back and giving them a week to think about it.

You might end the current conversation with:

"I know you're not ready to talk about this yet, but keep in mind that I want to help. I'll give you a few days to think it over and then maybe we can talk again?"

"You brought up some very valid concerns. Can I take a couple of days to think about them? I still want to help if I can."

"I know this was an embarrassing conversation, but I love you and I want to make sure that you're healthy. Can you think about what I've said and maybe book an appointment with the doctor?"

Some parents need time to digest and may act on their own, whether going to see their doctor, talking to a trusted friend, or even doing some research themselves. Give them a few days to consider what you've said and then approach them again.

Ultimately, talking to your parent about their incontinence might be embarrassing, but it's an important conversation to have if you're worried about how it might be affecting their health and their lifestyle. Good luck!

Need more help?

We're Here to Help

Toll Free: 1-877-775-6656

help@healthwick.ca

Mon to Fri, 9am to 5pm EST



Healthwick offers Canada's largest selection of incontinence products, including briefs with tabs (i.e. "adult diapers"), absorbent underwear/pull ups, pads, underpads and more. Most products are available in single-unit samples free of charge when you pay shipping.

All orders are shipped directly from our warehouse in Oakville, ON and are packaged in plain cardboard boxes to protect your privacy.

Shop online at

Healthwick.ca

or call Toll Free 1-877-775-6656