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Signs of Poor Personal Hygiene

We all have a concept of what good personal hygiene entails. Therefore poor personal hygiene may be evident by :

- Foul body odor
- Greasy and dirty appearance of the skin
- Unkempt hair on the head or facial hair
- Long and dirty fingernails
- Dirty and ragged clothing
- Personal hygiene also extends to one's habits and living space. Eating without washing one's hands, not disposing of garbage appropriately, lack of cleanliness when relieving oneself and an untidy and messy home are also signs of poor personal hygiene.



When is poor hygiene a health issue?

by Carol Bradley Bursack

The fact that many elders don't get around to bathing or changing clothes, common as it is, may not be a health issue. It's certainly a social issue, however, and it's one caregivers are acutely aware of.

Personal hygiene is rather subjective. If your parent or spouse was regular with showers or baths and particular about clothes, and now you find that he or she doesn't get around to bathing and runs around in smelly or obviously dirty clothes, then you should consider a few things:



• Depression can cause people to lose interest in how they look or smell. If your elders feel isolated or are depressed over life or health issues, they may not care enough to bother with hygiene. Depression is a much larger issue than cleanliness. If depression is successfully treated, then it's quite likely there will be a renewed interest in hygiene.

• As we age, our senses often become less acute. We're aware of hearing loss and changes in eyesight. However, we sometimes forget that the sense of smell, and taste for that matter, may have diminished. Have you ever wondered why the elderly lady in the elevator smells as though she bathed in perfume? It could be that she has a diminished sense of smell, so she dumps her scent on like water. This also means that an elder may not be aware of a sweaty smell. Some gentle hints may help here, though it can be a sensitive topic. Be prepared for the elder to be offended.

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•Memory can be an issue with hygiene. Days go by, and the elder just doesn't think of a shower or bath. He just took a shower, right? Well, maybe so, but that was several days ago. Again, some gentle reminders may help. A calendar with a note to shower on certain days might be good. Again, however, be aware that some offense may be taken. No one wants to be told they don't smell good.

•If the elder has dementia, fear may enter the picture. If this is the case, you've got your work cut out for you. It's not a simple matter of reminders. The elder may not know why the water is pouring down on their head. They may be afraid of falling. They may think the person helping them is trying to harm them. Education for the caregiver is important here. Your local Alzheimer's Association is a good source. Basically, you'll want to keep the bathroom nice and warm. Soft music may be relaxing. A walk-in shower with a sturdy shower chair, a handheld shower head and a non-slip rug on the floor are helpful. So are grab bars. Sometimes, you may have to back off, and just give a sponge bath. However you do this, tell the person, in a soothing voice, each step you are taking. This warning can keep them from feeling startled or anxious.

•Third parties can help. My mother-in-law was a very modest person. She allowed me to help her with nearly everything, but she didn't want me to help her with a shower. We lined up an in-home care agency to come twice a week and give her a shower. She wasn't thrilled, but she looked at this person as a nurse, and therefore, she wasn't as embarrassed as she was with family members. Again, safety was an issue, so grab bars, a safe stool and handheld shower head all helped.

Senior Friendly Bathrooms

For older adults, using the bathroom effectively and safely – whether it is the toilet, faucets or the shower/bathtub – can be difficult. For people who have lost mobility and strength, standing in a shower for a long time isn't possible, and getting in and out of a bathtub is a risky proposition. Thankfully, there has been progress! Here are some simple changes that can be made to create a safer space to bathe.

- 1. Install lever faucets.** Having a lever faucet gets rid of the twisting and turning that can be difficult for the elderly.
- 2. Get a sprayer attachment for your shower head.** A shower head that you can detach and hold in your hand eliminates the need to stand while showering.
- 3. Install grab bars and rails.** Installing grab bars and rails in the shower, bathtub and near the toilet makes bathing and using the toilet easier for the elderly person.
- 4. Raise the height of the toilet.** Simply raising the toilet's height as little as three inches can make all the difference for seniors.
- 5. Non-slip bath mats and rugs.** This is another easy way to prevent falls in the bathroom. Placing a non-slip mat in the shower prevents the senior from falling while showering and a non-slip rug on the floor outside the shower prevents any slipping once the senior is out of the shower. Non-slip tape is a lower cost option for shower pans and tub bottoms.
- 6 Curbless showers and walk-in bathtubs.** For the seniors that can't lift their legs, putting in a curbless shower can be a lifesaver. A curbless shower can make the transition from wheelchair to shower seat simple and easy for the senior and caregiver. Walk-in bathtubs are another popular option, as they are much easier to access than traditional tubs and most have a built-in seat as well.

