

Hygiene and Bathing Tips for the Elderly

If you care for an elderly parent, spouse, friend or other loved one, you know that physical and mental decline can affect every aspect of their life, including their personal hygiene. Trouble moving, memory loss and changes in their vision and sense of smell can all stop seniors from taking care of their personal hygiene properly. Or, they may be aware of it, but feel too embarrassed to ask for help.



Elderly hygiene issues are a cause for concern. Though it can be hard for you to provide and even harder for seniors to accept, hygiene help is an invaluable part of

caregiving. Don't be discouraged: It's possible for you to help your loved one stay clean and healthy while also allowing them to maintain their dignity and as much independence as possible.

How to Help Your Loved One Deal with Elderly Hygiene Issues

Keep these tips in mind when working through elderly hygiene issues with a loved one:

Talk about it.

This will likely be a hard discussion for both of you, but it's too important to avoid. Let them know you're coming from a place of love: You want to help them look and feel their best and keep them safe from health problems like skin or urinary tract infections. Don't be unkind or focus on what they can't do. Focus on what they need and what you can do to help them with that.

Create a routine.

A personal hygiene routine doesn't just keep your loved one clean and comfortable – it gives their days more structure, too. If there's a certain time of day or situation in which they're in their best mood or most clear-minded, plan to help them with washing and grooming then, if possible.

Don't insist on more bathing than is necessary.

You may be wondering, "How often should an elderly person bathe?" Seniors who aren't very mobile may not need to take a shower every day. Showering a few times a week, with sponge baths in between, may be enough.

Buy hygiene aids.

There are many devices that are designed to solve elderly hygiene issues by making it easier for a person to take care of their grooming. Shower chairs, no-rinse bathing wipes and long-handled shower brushes, razors and toenail clippers can all make taking care of personal hygiene safer and easier.

Encourage (a safe level of) independence.

Even small things like combing their own hair or putting on their own deodorant can help seniors maintain a sense of control over their lives. Dental hygiene is important, and tasks like brushing and flossing their teeth may be easier for seniors to keep doing on their own than other types of grooming.

Be understanding.

Everyone has good days and bad days, including your loved one. It's OK to skip a shower occasionally. Give them a sponge bath and some dry shampoo and try doing the real thing again when they're in a better state of mind.

How to Safely Bathe an Elderly Person

Whether you are supervising bath time or bathing an elder, here are some tips to make the experience safe and as comfortable as possible:

Make sure the bathroom is safe.

Walk-in showers, shower stools and grab bars are great. There should be nothing – not even a rug – on the floor for them to trip on. And avoid oily bath products that could make things slippery.

Create a comfortable environment.

Put on music they like. Keep the room, the water and the towels warm, not hot or cold. Lay out their clothes so they can slip into a comfortable outfit right away.

Protect privacy.

Help preserve the elderly person's dignity and ease embarrassment by providing a coverup during bath or shower time. A towel cover with Velcro tabs or a long plastic apron can work well.

Ease embarrassment.

As you help them shower or bathe, act as relaxed and casual as possible. This will help them forget about their embarrassment and do the same. Distract them by talking

about things that interest them, like their favorite TV show or what their grandkids are up to, rather than their health.

Explain every move.

As you bathe the elderly person, explain each step with cues like “I’m going to turn the water on now,” or “It’s time to wash your neck.” This prevents the person from being startled and enhances a sense of control

Bring in a pro.

Professional help is always a good option. This is especially true if your loved one is regularly refusing help with bathing or if the situation is becoming too emotionally difficult for you or for them.

Helping elderly loved ones maintain their personal hygiene is one of the most difficult parts of being a caregiver. But the experience can be made better if approached with thoughtfulness, determination and love for the person you’re caring for – and for yourself. Remember, be kind to yourself. You’re doing the best you can. Your loved one is lucky to have someone like you, who loves them so much. Don’t forget that.

