

How to make bathing easier

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Because of the slow, gradual degeneration of their brain cells, Alzheimer's elders are often unable to understand what's happening to them. And events that were once familiar—such as bathing—become frightening and humiliating experiences, which may trigger aggressive behaviors against caregivers.

But, there are proven techniques you can use to significantly reduce aggressive behaviors during bathing.

CMS requirements

In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CMS) guidelines require that caregivers personalize the bathing experience for each of their elders, in order to make the bath a more enjoyable experience.

This is a part of the CMS "Culture Change" initiative, whereby caregivers should make their caregiving environment as much like the elders would experience at home, as possible.

Don't creat a "battle"

According to the CMS: "It no longer is acceptable to force people to bathe if it causes them stress or 'a battle.'

"Evidence also shows that such 'battles' are not only distressing for residents, but for staff as well, and can lead to burn out."

In addition, CMS, in its Psychosocial Outcome Severity Guide, requires that you treat your Alzheimer's elders like anyone would like to be treated.

When bathing, this means providing respect and dignity, not allowing them to be naked publicly, and so on.

"It no longer is acceptable to force people to bathe if it causes them stress or 'a battle.'"

Respect the person's dignity

A key factor in preventing residents from becoming aggressive during bathing is to avoid doing things that are interpreted as not respecting their dignity, for even elders with Alzheimer's still have a sense of dignity.

These include:

- touching them without permission;
- rushing them; and
- using inappropriate language.

The entire bathing process should be explained to residents beforehand. While doing this, talk softly, stroke their hands or shoulders gently, and smile.

**Treat them as you would like to be treated:
With respect, love and kindness.**

Provide reassurance by singing a familiar song or playing gentle background music, and respect their need for privacy: Keep doors and blinds closed, and allow them to keep their underwear on, or a towel around their body, if they wish.

Treat them like you would like to be treated: With respect, love and kindness.

Meet the elder's preferences

According to a randomized trial by Dr. Philip Sloane of the University of North Carolina, it's also extremely important to address the resident's preferences and lifelong habits.

Find out whether the person likes to take a shower or a bath, and ask about

- √ their preferred bathing products;
- √ frequency of bathing; and
- √ preferred time of the day for bathing.

Letting your elders have their preferences in bathing works!

In research studies, person-centered showers – which involve using the residents' preferred bathing products and intensity of shower spray, while keeping them warm with a towel – led to significant reductions in bathing-related aggressive behavior in Alzheimer's elders.

Towel baths

The same effect was observed, in the study, for towel baths.

Notably, both techniques also significantly improved the residents' comfort and skin health.

A towel bath consists of washing the resident in bed with no-rinse soap, by gently massaging them through a moist, warm bath blanket that covers them completely.

Researchers said that "aggression declined by 53 percent in the person-centered shower group, and 60 percent in the towel-bath group."

Letting your elders have their preferences in bathing works!



"Both methods appear to be safe and effective," they said, "and if applied broadly in long-term care, they could produce a dramatic reduction in caregiver stress and resident distress."

Bag baths

Bag baths are another evidence-based technique that works well with some elders.

During the bag bath, the resident is covered with a bath blanket.

Then, one at a time, each body's area is uncovered, gently massaged with a moist washcloth, allowed to air dry for 30 to 60 seconds, and covered again. Different parts are washed with different washcloths.

The washcloths are prepared, just before the bathing, by placing them into a zipped plastic bag with just enough cleanser and warm water to moisten them.

Other possibilities, within a "Bathing without a Battle" approach, include sponge baths, bed baths, and washing a different part of the body every day.

Person-centered showers and bag baths both reduced aggression in studies



Coping with the aggressive resident

There may be circumstances, though, in which a resident becomes aggressive, no matter what you do to prevent this from happening.

Yelling, kicking, hitting and biting are common in these cases, and cause enormous distress to everyone involved.

So, it is extremely important that you know how to deal with these situations; and that you do this effectively while respecting your elder's dignity.

The key is to put yourself in you elder's place.

Keep in mind that their behavior originates from a combination of fear and confusion, due to the disease itself.

This makes them unable to understand what's happening around them; plus the embarrassment and humiliation of being naked in front of strangers.

Provide loving help

They just need your loving help. So, avoid being confrontational, don't argue or raise your voice.

Talk calmly and gently, reassure, and distract them, for example by offering a snack, a favorite object, or the picture of a loved one to cherish.

Use bathing and grooming as an opportunity to socialize with your elders

Ensure safety and comfort

Make the bathroom safe:

- Check that non-skid mats and grab bars are in place.
- Test the water's temperature before the bath.
- Have a waterproof chair for the shower.
- Ensure the floor is dry.

Remember that you should never leave the resident alone. So, prepare in advance all you need:

- Shampoo.
- Soap. (Preferably one that does not require rinsing.)
- Washcloths.
- Towels.

Towels should be warm and large enough to completely cover the elder.

Place soap into a cloth sewed into a pocket for easy holding. Ensure the room is warm and well lit.

Cover mirrors and other reflective surfaces, including windows. Since Alzheimer's elders cannot always recognize their image, they may think there is another person in the room and become upset.

Involve the resident

Make residents feel helpful. Ask them to hold the sponge or the soap for you (this also keeps their hands busy preventing them from scratching, pushing, etc.).

Praise and thank them often. If appropriate, allow residents to wash themselves, but make the task easier for them:

- Show what they need to do.
- Provide simple one-step instructions.
- Use tactful reminders for important areas that need to be washed, such as the genital area.

Provide help if needed, but avoid scrubbing since this may cause severe skin damage.

Also:

✓ Check for reddened skin areas, particularly if the person is at risk of bedsores, because of limited mobility or incontinence problems.

✓ If showering, use hand-held shower heads, as they can be directed at one part of the body at the time, and are therefore less frightening.

For the same reason, use the less intense spray or cover the shower head with a cloth for a softer stream.

✓ During hair washing, have the person hold a cloth on their forehead to prevent the water from running over their face.

After bathing, pat the elder until dried, particularly within skin folds and under the breasts.

Dry well between the feet fingers with cotton buds, and apply a mild lotion to help maintain a soft skin.

Be kind and caring

Research shows that caregivers' attitudes have a great influence on the likelihood of a resident becoming aggressive.

A hurried pace of bath, touching without permission, spraying water without warning, confrontational or disrespectful language, and failure to explain – and prepare for – the bathing routine, were associated with increased occurrence and severity of aggressive behaviors in Alzheimer's residents.

So:

- Explain the bath beforehand.
- Use kind and respectful speech and body language.
- Keep your tone of voice calm, soothing, and kind.
- Maintain eye contact and smile sincerely.
- Say "please" and "thank you," and praise often.

Make it safe...

Because of loss of judgment, Alzheimer's elderly are unable to recognize and avoid dangers. Therefore, safety is a top priority.

- Never leave the resident alone. For this, it is helpful to prepare what you need in advance – soap, shampoo, washcloths and towels – and have all items within easy reach.
- Check the water's temperature before, and during, the bath.
- Use non-skid mats, and have your elders hold onto grab bars.
- Cover reflective surfaces, such as mirrors and windows. Most elderly with advanced dementia mistake their image for that of a stranger, and become frightened.

...and pleasurable!

Don't forget that, like any other activity, bathing should be an opportunity for enjoyment, relaxation and social interaction.

Playing the elder's favorite music softly in the background will add to the atmosphere and, most importantly, will help reduce aggressive behaviors, including hitting, and improve the residents' cooperation, according to a study carried out at Tennessee Technological University.

And use bathing and grooming as an opportunity to socialize with your elders.

Take your time! Talk to them! Ask conversational questions! Make them feel important.

Take your time! Talk to them! Ask conversational questions! Make them feel important.

Top bathing tips

- Avoid scrubbing the skin hard, as this may cause damage. Gently rub it with a delicate sponge, and pat it dry with a soft towel afterwards.
 - Always start washing the body's area that the elder finds less upsetting.
 - Ensure privacy. Keep doors and blinds closed, and allow residents to keep their underwear on, or wrap themselves in a towel.
 - Give them simple tasks (e.g., holding the sponge, soap, or washcloth) to make them feel useful, and prevent them from using their hands for hitting, should they become agitated.
 - Let your elders wash themselves whenever possible, providing help only if necessary.
- Make this easier for them by giving a demonstration of their task, one-step instructions, and gentle reminders, for example of areas they forgot to wash.
- Use hand-held devices when showering, and always with the less intense spray, as they are less frightening, for different body's areas can be washed separately.
 - Place a small towel on your elder's forehead when washing their hair, to prevent shampoo and water from going into their eyes and face.
 - Make sure all areas are dried completely after bathing, especially skin folds, the area under the breasts and between the fingers; apply a softening lotion.

Follow the bath with good grooming!

Grooming is a gift!

Good grooming is a gift you give your residents. Everyone knows good grooming is important because it promotes self-confidence, builds self-esteem, encourages a positive attitude and improves their approach and enjoyment of the day.

Men always want to look handsome and women always want to look pretty, no matter their age.

Sometimes they need help to look the way they want to.

Good grooming involves all aspects of personal hygiene, and is performed to promote health, prevent irritations and infections, and reflect a neat and well-cared-for appearance.

Fingernail care – always check with your supervisor before performing fingernail care. If there are no restrictions, soaking the nails in warm, soapy water for a few minutes feels good and helps clean the nails and soften the skin.

Most women love manicures and polish and many facilities provide such services by either volunteers or specialists.

Toenail care – is basically the same as fingernail care. Foot massage is comforting and may be added but must be approved by your supervisor. Some women also like to have their toenails polished. Some facilities also provide pedicures.

Hair care – combing, brushing and styling. Shampooing is usually done along with the bath or shower or at the beauty shop. Include the resident as much as possible and let the resident choose the style and what adornments are to be used.

Facial hair care - both men and women want to be well-groomed facially. That means removal of unwanted hair on and about the face, unless removal is contraindicated or the resident does not wish it done.

Electric razors are better because they are safer and allow more resident participation.

Also note that women grow facial hair, especially white chin ones that have a tendency to stick out straight and be noticeable. Some older women still grow moustaches and have unruly eyebrows.

Skin care – allows for observation and preventative measures to guard against irritation, infection and sores. Lotion keeps the skin from becoming dry and flaky and irritated.

And note: Nothing dampens an appearance more than glasses that are dirty or have medical tape holding them together.

Clothing – choice of clothing should be left to the resident unless the resident is unable to do so. Then the choice is left up to you and your sense of style and knowledge of what is appropriate.

At night, pajamas and nightgowns should be offered. Beware of dressing the resident for convenience sake (sweats, hospital gowns) unless absolutely necessary because of physical condition. Clothing should match, fit properly and be color coordinated with socks and shoes.

How to make bathing easier

Learning objectives:

1. To understand why elders with Alzheimer's may have problems with bathing.
2. To Learn a few simple techniques that can significantly reduce problem behaviors during bathing.
3. To understand the importance, and procedures, for providing your elders with a good social experience during bathing and grooming.
4. To understand the importance to your elders of good grooming.

1. **True, False.** CMS guidelines require that caregivers give their elders their preferred choice of bath, whenever possible.

2. **True, False.** CMS Psychosocial Guidelines require that you treat your Alzheimer's elders like anyone would expect to be treated in similar circumstances.

3. **What are some things that are known to trigger aggression in elders during bathing?** (Check all that apply.)

- a. touching them without permission
- b. rushing them
- c. using inappropriate language
- d. spraying water without warning

4. **True, False.** In general, you should hurry your elders through bathing and grooming as fast as possible, in order to keep opportunities for aggression to a minimum.

5. **True, False.** Towel and bag baths have been shown to significantly reduce aggression in research studies.

6. **True, False.** When dealing with an aggressive elder, the best course of action is to directly confront them with a loud voice, in order to get their undivided attention as quickly as possible.

7. **True, False.** You should not scrub their skin harshly, as this can cause serious damage.

8. **True, False.** It's a good idea to explain to them ahead of time what you'll be doing during their bathing experience.

9. **True, False.** You should not let your elders help with their bath, as that can cause severe frustration, which can result in episodes of aggression.

10. **True, False.** Bathing and grooming should be pleasant, social experiences for your elders, and not tasks to rush through.

Name _____ Date _____ Score _____

Answers to Quiz

- 5. T
- 4. F
- 3. a,b,c,d
- 2. T
- 1. T
- 6. F
- 7. T
- 8. T
- 9. F
- 10. T