



# Dementia Digest

## The Bathing Issue

Providing personal care, particularly bathing persons with dementia, can be a challenge for both family and professional caregivers. We often see difficult behaviors occur during the bath or shower as the person with dementia will fight, kick, scream, bite or swear. So how can we get persons with dementia clean?

**First, ask yourself, could these behaviors be due to pain caused by the range of motion movements that occur during bathing?** Physical pain is common in many older adults. If you suspect pain, refer to Hospice of the Valley's Joining the Journey booklet for an overview of dementia pain management.

**Re-think the bathing experience** with the goal of making the experience *comfortable* and *pleasurable* for the person. We all have preferences in terms of our own bathing experience. Some of us like to shower while others like a bath; some like a hot shower/bath while others prefer cool water; some like to shower/bathe at night while others prefer it in the morning. Therefore, determine how and when the person with dementia prefers not only to get clean but also to feel good!

**Approach techniques** can set the context for the bathing experience. Rather than asking, "Do you want to take your bath now?" (for which the answer is almost always "NO!" for the person who hates the bath/shower experience), say very nicely, "Let's get freshened up for the day!" Getting freshened up has a very different context than bathing.

**Have the room ready to go** so that you can proceed with the bath/shower experience. Make sure the room is warm and that you use low lighting. For showering, use a hand held showerhead to only wet one area at

a time while keeping the person covered with a large towel or blanket so that they are not exposed. Not only does this provide dignity but also keeps that person warm. For those who don't like to get wet, have them sit in a chair and get a basin of warm water (which can be diluted with no rinse soap so that no rinsing has to take place) and give a sponge bath.

**Begin bathing in the least sensitive area first!** Most people with dementia do not like to have water in their faces so think about beginning to wash the legs and feet first, followed by the arms, trunk, peri area and then the face.

**Save washing the hair until last** or consider washing the hair at a separate time. For ladies, a weekly trip to the beauty salon can be a much more pleasurable experience. For those with fine, short hair, no rinse shampoo can be used by applying it to a wet washcloth and then running it gently through the hair.

### The TOWEL BATH METHOD:

For those with whom the above strategies are not successful

This bath utilizes a large beach size towel – fan folded, 2 –3 washcloths, 1-2 oz. of no rinse soap mixed in about 2 quarts of warm water and a large garbage bag.

1. Have the person lie in bed and disrobe him/her and cover him/her immediately with a warm blanket.
2. Place the beach towel and washcloths in the garbage bag and dilute the no rinse soap in about 2 quarts of warm (~110 degrees) water.
3. Pour the water into the bag and gently massage the water so that it is uniformly absorbed into the towels – the towels should be wet but not saturated.
4. Take the fan folded beach towel and begin to apply it at the person's feet and move it up until the body is covered. As you are applying the moistened towel, remove the top blanket. This will assure that the person is never exposed.
5. Once the moistened blanket is applied, begin to wash by massaging on the top of the towel. Use the wash clothes to wash the face, underarms, under breasts and peri area. Ask the person to roll to the side and wash the back.
6. After the bath is completed remove the wet towel and cover the person with a blanket and give a light massage with lotion. Our experience has demonstrated that many persons will nap after this spa-like treatment!

### Distraction Techniques

- Music, reflecting the person's preference, or singing old familiar songs can lighten the mood.
- Talking about subjects the person enjoys can be helpful.
- Giving the person something to hold on to (not the handheld showerhead!) such as a towel or stuffed animal can provide distraction especially while washing in the peri area.
- Consider giving the person something to eat – sweets are often a very pleasant way to distract while you are quickly at work.