

Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

Wonder ... Woman: Providing Wonderful Care to Women with Disabilities



By: Susan Ludwig Goharriz, BSc RN

At some point in your life, you may be called upon to take care of a woman's body. It may be your own or that of someone you love. You may be a staff person entrusted with the care of another woman. You may be a person who has been asked to teach a woman how to take care of her own body. The possibilities (and variations) are endless.

Before Beginning

This may go without saying, and I will say it anyway! Personal care is just that – Personal and Private! That means that you will never lose a sense of awe that you are entering a sacred space when you are touching a woman or teaching her about caring for her body. It is essential to model both privacy and dignity. This means covering everything that does not need to be exposed and keeping doors and curtains closed. It means using gloves. It means focusing on the woman and her needs – and not responding to questions or invitations to speak to co-workers or even other members. (Do I need to say that cell phones are out of the question?) It means telling the woman everything you plan to do and checking to be sure she understands and gives consent. It also means not speaking of her care with others except in a confidential care plan for the sake of continuity. You may even want to chant quietly words that let her know you are showing respect for the privacy of her body and of the act of caring for it.

Confidence in Care

This article will help you to feel confident that you can give care and/or advice that will enhance a woman's well-being – both physically and emotionally.

1. Pre-pubescence

Care of a woman's body differs depending on her age and the stage of her development. A pre-adolescent woman needs to learn to develop good grooming habits. It is important as her body approaches adolescence that she begins to bathe herself daily. It is particularly important to support a pre-pubescent woman in developing a sense of personal privacy at this age. This will teach the young woman that these parts of her body demand respect. Emerging pubic and under-arm hair are a signal that her body will begin to produce a different type of perspiration. It is important that these areas be washed daily using the three-part mantra – "Soap, Water and Lots of Bubbles!" Many people are

surprised to hear that soap is not all that effective in cleaning our skin – it's the foam that lifts the oils and accompanying bacteria away from the skin and allow it to be rinsed away. A woman needs to be careful, however, not to wash her labia minora (the slippery part near her vulva) with soap (http://www.riversideonline.com/source/images/image_popup/ans7_vulva.jpg). Doing so can cause irritation. Simply rinsing with a clean face cloth and water is enough to keep that part of a woman fresh! The rubric is, if it grows hair or has sweat glands – use soap; if its slippery to begin with, DON'T!

2. Toileting

After using a toilet, a woman needs to take special care. When she urinates, she needs only to blot her labia majora carefully (where she has pubic hair) with bathroom tissue. The direction of her blotting will be from the front of her body (urine is sterile) to back (her vagina is clean). When she has a bowel movement, she needs to be careful not to allow the bathroom tissue to carry bowel matter (which is “dirty” and can cause infection) towards her vulva. She can wipe side-to-side or front to back, whichever is more comfortable or convenient. Of course, after using the toilet, she will wash her hands (“soap-water-bubbles”) for at least 20 seconds. For a reference, it takes about 20 seconds to sing “Happy Birthday to You” or the “ABCD song.” Toileting is always a private activity and someone who supports another person to do this must be very careful to maintain that privacy. Again, using drapes, wearing gloves and keeping the door closed are important.

3. Puberty

Many women have wildly fluctuating hormones that result in an overabundance of oil on their skin and hair during puberty. A woman will probably need to wash her hair every day or every other day. Help her select a style that is flattering and easy to care for. Most good hair-cuts keep their shape for about 4-6 weeks, so schedule hair appointments at regular intervals. Some women make decisions about colouring and/or getting a permanent in their hair. Be careful about this – there are few things more distressing than a bad colour job or a bad perm! (The word “permanent” is a reminder that it has to grow out at a rate of about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch per month!) Talk to a trusted hair professional about these kinds of decisions. And choose a hair professional who has hair similar to the woman seeking her professional care. S/he has had years of caring for that kind of hair and is best suited to supporting good decisions.

4. Riding the Cotton Pony

Women have had “pet” names for their menstrual periods for a long time. I thought I had heard them all until a group with women who live with developmental disability shared the names they knew. The “cotton pony” wins, hands down! At about mid-way on the Tanner Developmental Scale (<http://healthvermont.gov/family/toolkit/tools%5CJ-1%20CARD%20Tanner%20Stages.pdf>), a woman will normally begin to menstruate. She needs to begin to keep a private record of her cycles to avoid being caught off guard. I recommend that she keep a small calendar in a private drawer (possibly her underwear drawer) – and mark each day with a check mark. On those days she has her menstrual period, mark the day in some distinctive way (place a sticker, or use a coloured marker) so that those days are distinguished from others. Eventually, she will be able to anticipate her next menstrual period and will not be caught without sanitary protection. Helping a woman with her menstrual hygiene is a very private activity. Assess each woman for the degree to which she can be independent – and if she needs your help, be sure to observe draping, gloves and closed doors. A woman needs to make personal decisions about menstrual hygiene. Some women prefer to use

sanitary pads. Others prefer to use tampons. Many women combine the two products – using tampons or pads on “light” days, tampons and pads on heavy days and tampons alone during activities like swimming or other sports. If the woman uses a tampon, it is essential that she remove it every 4 – 6 hours to avoid the possibility of toxic shock syndrome. Find some way of “marking” her tampon use so she does not forget that she is wearing it! Women who use pads need to change them at least 5 -6 times every day. It is extra important to shower and wash her hair at this time.

Many women have a degree of discomfort in the pre-menstrual times of their cycle. Some women suffer from pre-menstrual bloating, moodiness and sleep disturbances. It is important to note, that many women also experience a tremendous time of introversion during their pre-menstrual periods – and find themselves more apt to hum to themselves, to appreciate beauty and to have a surge in creativity. This is another good reason to keep a private calendar. It will help a woman understand what she is experiencing. Severe pre-menstrual symptoms can be discussed with a sympathetic health care provider. Remember, however, pre-menstrual symptoms are not an illness! Most can be managed with a bit of insight and understanding (and chocolate can provide the soothing magnesium for many of these symptoms!).

Some women also experience discomfort during their menstrual periods. Some experience cramping, headaches and other symptoms. You may discuss with a health care provider whether mild pain remedies would be a help at this time. Exercise can be a great relief for menstrual cramping – increasing circulation in general and producing endorphins. An orgasm can also help with cramping. For women who are interested and able, there is no reason to refrain from sexual pleasure (solo or with a partner) during menstrual discharge.

5. Skin Care

A woman needs to wash her face twice daily, using a gentle product. In general, if a face care product has a strong odor; it is probably not a good idea to use it on her face. Using harsh cleansers – even those that “smell” antiseptic – can cause a woman’s skin to break out and cause stinging. After gentle washing and careful blotting, apply a good fragrance-free moisturizer to the still damp skin. The moisturizer will seal the remaining water in the skin and keep it well hydrated. Encouraging a woman to drink water also helps to keep her skin looking healthy – but don’t try to enforce “eight glasses” (or some other arbitrary amount) a day. Just encourage her to assess if she is thirsty, and if so, drink!

6. Grooming

A manicure can help a woman feel great!! When a manicure starts to show signs of wear, however, it’s time to remove it! If she wants to wear nail polish all the time, help her learn to apply it herself (putting it on her dominant hand first and letting it dry before trying the other hand). Make sure that her cuticles are soft and well pushed back. She needs to wear hand cream in the cold weather to be sure she doesn’t have cracked skin that can lead to infections. Make it a habit to use it at least once daily after washing. By the same token, toenails need to be kept short and well-shaped. If you are not confident that you can do this for another person, leave it to a professional! Cuticles need to be kept soft with creams – but never put cream between toes! If you can get permission, check between a woman’s toes for cracking skin. This could be a sign of a fungus infection. If you think this is the case, consult with a physician about how to care for this uncomfortable condition!

Discuss with her whether she wants to shave her legs and under-arm hair. Shaving is a choice and does not actually result in better grooming outcomes. You may also discuss with her the use of deodorant. Unfortunately, most deodorants contain antiperspirants as well. These are very irritating and can cause itching and rashes. Many women don’t actually need deodorant – daily bathing is

enough to keep them smelling fresh. Women who have heavy perspiration and/or who suffer from “nervous perspiration” may not have a choice about their use. A trusted family member, a care-person or a good friend can help a woman decide if she needs deodorant. One closing word about deodorant . . . it is only to be used immediately after bathing or showering! Smearing deodorant on over sweat doesn’t really help – and may give the woman a false sense of security!

7. Care of “the girls”

By the time a woman’s breast development is complete, she needs to make a decision about whether or not she wants to wear a bra. This decision will have no impact on her breast health, so her decision is a personal one and is based solely on her comfort. If she does decide to wear a bra, schedule a bra fitting (available at most lingerie and some department stores) with a professional fitter. If you can see a bulge above or below a bra band when viewing a woman’s back, it is the wrong size and will be uncomfortable to the wearer. A woman needs 3 or 4 well-fitted bras and can wash them after wearing one for two days unless she has difficulty with excess perspiration.

8. General Health Assessment

Every woman needs to have a physical assessment done at recommended intervals by a physician or nurse practitioner. This needs to begin when she is young – and will continue for the remainder of her life. She needs to have an annual breast exam at least by the time she starts menstruating. She needs to have a Pap smear and pelvic assessment beginning at 19 years of age or when she becomes sexually active. She also needs to be sure that her routine immunizations are kept up to date. Find a health care provider who can make this annual assessment a positive teaching opportunity. Women can have a Pap smear in a semi-reclining position if this makes her feel more comfortable. A woman needs to learn to make a list of questions to ask her health care provider prior to each visit.

9. Menopause

At some point in her life, a woman’s menstrual cycles will change and eventually stop. The time before her periods stop is called perimenopause – and can be characterized by a variety of symptoms. Some women have no transition discomfort. Some women experience “hot flashes” during which she may suddenly experience heat and profuse perspiration – followed by a chilled sensation. This is difficult for a woman if she experiences it during the night. She can suffer sleep disturbances and she may have to change her bed sheets at night because they become drenched. She may experience vaginal dryness. She may also begin to experience heavier and more frequent menstrual periods. Many of these symptoms are not caused by estrogen deficiency but may be caused by estrogen instability and even by an excess of estrogen. It is important for a woman to discuss all symptoms with a sympathetic health care provider. Some may recommend estrogen or hormone replacement therapy (ERT or HRT). Others may recommend alternatives to HRT or both. It may be helpful to practice exercise, meditation and yoga at this time. The woman may appreciate massage therapy to relieve some of the discomfort as well.

At some point during the her perimenopause period, a woman will need to begin to have bone density studies and mammograms. A mammogram is a good screening test to rule out breast malignancy. Bone density studies can help a woman be alerted to early signs of osteoporosis (increasing brittleness of bones). A woman’s health care provider will tell her how often these tests need to be

done, will help her interpret the results and discuss any indications for her care related to them. In addition, the woman may be advised to have a blood test called “CA125” which is a screening test for ovarian cancer. A health care provider can help a woman decide to do this based on her age, her family history and her sexual health history.

Caring for a woman’s body is an honour and a privilege. A woman who learns to take good care of herself early in her life will make it a habit and a priority. If others care for her, she can reflect this caring in her entire affect. She will learn to incorporate lessons of privacy into other aspects of her life. When she lives in a well-cared for body, she can feel confident about herself. People around her will see her sense of self-respect and will be invited to respond in kind.

About the Author Susan Ludwig Goharriz has been teaching about sexual health and social skills to individuals living with developmental disabilities for nearly twenty six years. In addition to groups of individuals, she has facilitated groups for family members, care providers, teachers and other professionals. Anyone wishing additional information may contact her at ssludwig@ican.net.

From The Editors

An article on the care of the men and the male body is being written and will appear in an upcoming issue of the newsletter. Our goal is to have a variety of topics and as such we have decided not to ‘bunch up’ articles about intimate care.

Editors: Dave Hingsburger, Vita Community Living Services and Angie Nethercott, North Community Network of Specialized Care, Hands TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca

Answers to FAQ’s about the Newsletter

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