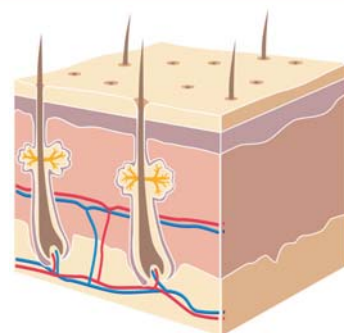




## Information Sheet

### Continence and skin care

For people experiencing incontinence, skin care management is important for maintaining skin integrity. Good hygiene helps to prevent odour, maintain a healthy skin environment and avoid infection.



#### Structure and function of the skin

The skin is made of three layers. The epidermis, the superficial (outer) layer, acts as a barrier to the outside environment. The dermis, the second layer, is tough and elastic containing blood vessels, lymph capillaries, sensory nerve endings, sweat glands and hair follicles. Collagen in the dermal layer provides strength and elasticity to the skin. The subcutaneous layer is the deepest layer and consists of connective tissue and fat.

Healthy skin has a pH of 5.5, which is slightly acidic. This natural acidity discourages bacterial growth and provides a moisture barrier. One of the major functions of healthy skin is to maintain a physical barrier against the external environment. This prevents harmful substances entering the body and prevents excessive fluid loss.

Prolonged contact of the skin with urine or faeces leads to skin irritation, often known as Incontinence Associated Dermatitis (IAD).

Inflammation of the surrounding skin surface produces redness (erythema), pain and itching (pruritis), and sometimes swelling and blister formation. Sometimes the skin may also become infected, which worsens the situation. If the skin is kept damp and warm, the environment promotes bacteria growth which in turn may cause fungal skin infections and urinary tract infections.

#### Affects of ageing on the skin

Ageing skin is generally more vulnerable and needs continual care and assessment in relation to incontinence.

As people age, the dermal layer becomes thinner and its ability to act as a barrier to the external environment is lessened. It also contains less collagen and is often dry which creates cracks where bacteria may multiply.

Ageing skin is more prone to damage by friction and may not heal as quickly.

#### Skin problems and incontinence

Good skin care management for a person with bladder or bowel problems cannot be underestimated. Urine and faeces can cause damage to the skin causing redness, irritation and soreness. The skin areas most at risk are the perineum (the general region between the anus and the genital organs), the inner thighs and between the buttocks.

If the skin becomes red and irritated this may cause considerable distress and discomfort to the person. Skin irritation may be difficult to heal, especially if the incontinence is ongoing. It is advisable to consult a health professional such as a doctor or continence nurse to ensure appropriate skin care products and management procedures are used to promote healing.

Common causes of incontinence related skin problems include:

- ▶ Constant moisture on the skin from urine and/or faeces
- ▶ Continence products not being changed regularly
- ▶ Rubbing or friction of the skin by continence products, clothing and bed linen
- ▶ Skin irritation and/or infection from faeces (which contain bacteria)
- ▶ Skin infections (for example fungal infections)
- ▶ Sensitive skin or general ill health which can contribute to the skin being more vulnerable to irritation
- ▶ Some cleaning products or methods may cause problems, for example perfumed products may cause irritation, or rubbing of the skin with cleaning may cause irritation.

People at high risk of developing skin problems from incontinence include those with ongoing or intractable incontinence, faecal incontinence, poor skin condition (including sensitive or ageing skin), limited mobility and constant exposure of the skin to moisture.

### **Guidelines to preventing skin problems from incontinence include:**

- ▶ A continence assessment by a health professional to identify and treat the cause of the incontinence and to ensure good management practices are being implemented to deal with the incontinence
- ▶ Close monitoring of skin irritation by a health professional following the continence assessment
- ▶ Selection of continence products with appropriate absorbency which are applied correctly and are comfortable and a good fit for the person
- ▶ Changing continence products as soon as possible after soiling
- ▶ Gently cleansing and drying skin following changing of a continence product
- ▶ Keeping the skin clean, moisturised if it is dry and applying barrier cream to help protect the skin from further irritation.

**Note:** generally products which contain alcohol, perfumes or disinfectants should not be used for people with incontinence related skin irritation. These products may be drying to the skin and may cause rashes to already sensitive areas. Talc powders are also generally avoided as they may also be drying to the skin.

### **Skin care products**

Skin care products are designed to:

- ▶ Keep the skin clean and healthy
- ▶ Protect the skin from moisture and irritants to reduce the incidence of skin irritation and breakdown.

## **Skin cleansers**

These are an alternative to soap and water and are designed to maintain the normal pH and moisture content of the skin. Cleansers are available in pump sprays, foams and pre-moistened wipes. Cleansers are also available in rinse or no rinse preparations. A cleanser should care for the normal pH of the skin and not contain harsh detergents, fragrances or alcohol. It is important to apply cleanser gently to reduce friction and further damage to the skin.

## **Moisturisers**

Intact skin that is supple and moisturised is the first line of natural defence for healthy skin. Moisturisers are designed to preserve healthy moisture within the skin by sealing the moisture in or adding moisture to the skin if needed. Moisturisers are available in lotions or creams.

## **Barriers**

Barrier products are a protective film or cream designed to protect the skin from contact with moisture such as perspiration, urine and faeces, while assisting to prevent friction from wearing absorbent continence products and bed linen. Barrier products are also designed to provide relief to irritated and sensitive skin. Many barrier products also contain anti microbial properties.

## **Key points in skin care management for people with incontinence**

- ▶ Assessment of the skin by a health professional and ongoing care.
- ▶ Skin care including cleansing, hydrating (if needed) with moisturisers and barrier creams for protection.
- ▶ Maintain skin integrity and reduce odour by gentle cleansing and drying of the skin when required. Moistened soft disposable wipes may be preferable to face cloths which may be harsh on sensitive skin.
- ▶ Appropriate selection and use of continence products, with the aim to contain the incontinence while keeping the skin as dry as possible and maintaining the normal skin pH level. Some products have a breathable waterproof backing which may reduce humidity and moisture build up caused by perspiration. Try to avoid plastic pants which do not allow air circulation. Fit products close to the body to avoid leakage and rubbing of the skin with movement.
- ▶ Often a trial of continence products helps to find an appropriate product to suit the person's needs. A Continence Nurse Advisor can assist with this.
- ▶ Avoid tight fitting clothing which may cause rubbing and soreness of the skin. Looser fitting clothing may help to improve air circulation and reduce perspiration to skin which is irritated and exposed to incontinence.

## **Further information**

See also our information sheets: *Pressure Management*, *Continence Products*, *Continence: key points*, *Continence: managing incontinence when travelling*.

For further information on skin care and continence or to make an appointment please contact the Continence Resource Centre located at the Independent Living Centre.

## Contacting the Independent Living Centre

For further information or to make an appointment to visit the display please contact the Independent Living Centre. The Independent Living Centre offers free advice on equipment and techniques to help you with everyday tasks.

Independent Living Centre  
11 Blacks Road  
Gilles Plains SA 5086

Phone: 1300 885 886 (SA & NT callers only) or 8266 5260

Fax: 8266 5263

Email: [ilcsa@dfc.sa.gov.au](mailto:ilcsa@dfc.sa.gov.au)

Website: [www.sa.gov.au/disability/ilc](http://www.sa.gov.au/disability/ilc)

Accessible off street parking is available.

Bus routes:

From the city T500/T501 or  
207/208 to Stop 28 Sudholz Road

Timetable information: 8210 1000

