



SENIOR HYGIENE GUIDE

Bathing - There are a wealth of questions on how to get aging parents to bathe – especially when the elder has Alzheimer's or severe dementia.

One consideration is *how often* do elderly parents need to bathe? Since the U.S. is a melting pot of people from around the world, we have different cultures with different views on what staying clean means. Many of the generation now in their 80s and 90s grew up with weekly baths – sometimes because they lived out on farms and water was too precious to waste. For others, that routine was just normal behavior.

All of this is to say that if your elder won't shower every single day, he or she is not going to die of some dreadful disease caused by "lack of bath" syndrome. For some elders, some fairly clean clothes and a weekly bath is what they consider enough. However, there are other issues to consider. Watch for change in attitude. A change in attitude is a key component with bathing, as it is with many aging issues.

Is the change in bathing habits due to memory loss, confusion or fear?

If your elder has dementia, then you may have a more difficult situation on your hands.

People can think they have just showered, but in reality that was last week. Or, they can become confused when they begin the process, and rather than tell someone they are confused, they just avoid it. Or they can become afraid of the shower or bath because they don't know what it's all about or they think they will get hurt. Think about how frightening it would be to have water pouring down on your head when you can't figure out the reason. Confusion and lack of understanding are bound to lead to fear.

What can caregivers do about Alzheimer's and bathing?

- If you feel that the reason your mom isn't bathing is that she thinks she has already taken a bath, or that she just doesn't see the point, try tying her bath to something fun. Say something like, "Let's both get cleaned up and pretty and we'll go for lunch." This could [nudge her into thinking it's worth her while](#), and even fun, to spruce up.
- Make sure the shower and/or [bath are safe and comfortable](#). If the bathroom tends to be cool, see if there is a way it can be warmed up before a bath. If a shower is the best route to go for the person, install a grab bar to for stability while getting in, a comfortable stool to sit on and a hand-held shower head. This type of shower head keeps the water from continually coming down on the person's head, so the elder is forewarned when it's hair washing time.
- If dementia, such as Alzheimer's, is so advanced that the elder is frightened of water, or scared of the tub or shower, you may want to try a different tactic. A person can get clean with sponge baths.



- Whether you are using a sponge bath method or helping the person with a shower, talk about what you will do next, taking into consideration the person's dementia and where they are mentally. ***Don't surprise them.*** Describe your every move in a low, soothing voice. Say, "I'm going to wipe your face with this nice warm cloth, okay?" "I'm going to lift your arm and wash, but I'm keeping you warm and comfortable under this blanket."
- Find products like dry shampoos so you don't have to wash hair as often.
- Take privacy and modesty into consideration. Some people don't want family or others close to them to bathe them. Hiring an in-home agency to come and bathe may work best. Also, agency people are trained, so if you find a good agency, they may be able to cope much better than family members.
- Remember that a daily bath isn't necessary. Also, please ask yourself if all the fuss is because of your own standards and what people will think of you if your mom isn't pristine all the time, or if it's really about her health and comfort. Try to compromise. Yes, cleanliness is important for good health. But a complete bath or shower daily is not next to Godliness. It could be closer to torture for your loved one. Try to find alternatives and a middle ground so that some sort of hygiene is maintained with a minimum of unpleasantness.

Depression could be at fault

Another issue that may contribute to an elderly parent whose bathing and grooming habits take a turn for the worse is depression. Some elderly are clean freaks, and love their daily bath. When the decision was made to move to the nursing home where a spouse lived, the other spouse went through the expected period of depression. One of the major clues was that she would put on the same clothes every day. Some of this was simply that she saw them laying on a chair and forgot that they'd been worn. However, some of change in her behavior was because she was temporarily depressed.

Depressed people often don't care about personal hygiene. They don't care about their clothes. They just don't care in general. If you see this happening to your elder, then you have a reason to be concerned. If the depression doesn't lift, ask their doctor to consider treating them for depression. If you find your elder has changed from a very clean person to one who doesn't care about appearances at all, you may want to consider a checkup to see if depression is at the bottom of this change. This depression is especially prominent after the death of a spouse.

The issue of elders who were once reasonably clean adults refusing to take showers and wear fresh clothes is one that is far more common than most people think.



Sometimes the issue is depression. If we have a parent who no longer takes an interest in staying clean or wearing clean clothes, it's wise to look at depression first. A checkup with a doctor is a good idea, especially if low energy is also part of it, or if they just don't care about anything at all. Depression isn't always obvious to an observer.

Another factor is control. As people age, they lose more and more control over their lives. But one thing they generally can control is dressing and showers. The more they are nagged, the

more they resist. "This younger generation is trying to take over everything. Well, they aren't telling me when to shower, that's for sure. Besides, I'm just fine!"

A third issue is a decreased sense of sight and smell. What your nose picks up as old sweat, they don't even notice. Not on themselves. Not on their mate. Their senses are not as acute as yours, or as theirs once were.

A fourth cause is memory. The days go by. They aren't marked with tons of activities as they were when they were young. If there isn't something special about Wednesday, well – it could be Tuesday or Thursday. They simply lose track of time and don't realize how long it's been since they showered.

Also, working in with memory is the fact that many of our elders didn't bathe or shower every day when they grew up. We now take daily bathing for granted in this country, but when our parents were young, a weekly bath was likely more the norm. They may have gotten into a more frequent bathing habit in their last decades, but their brain is taking them into the past. Once a week, it's bath time. Then, they forget what day it is, or even forget when they last took a bath or changed clothes. Time just slides by.

Another big issue can be fear or discomfort. Fear of slipping in the tub. Discomfort trying to get in and out. More serious is when a person with Alzheimer's or dementia is in the bathroom and doesn't understand why there is water running on them, or believes the drain that may suck them down. They just don't understand what you are trying to "do to them."

Okay. So what do you do about it?

This is a case where compromise is essential. Third parties can also help. Many seniors don't remember to bathe or change clothes, but look you in the eye and say they had. And believed they had.

Some of this is memory. Thought they must have taken a bath somewhere along the line, so they said they did. However, much of it was fear - being afraid of the shower or of getting in the tub. They are probably also being confused by it all. Denial was easier.



Also, so seniors are exceptionally modest, even for their generation. Bathing can be far too intimate. One "solution" get an in-home care agency to come in for the sole purpose of a bath. Be aware that some seniors will act out. This behavior can come from a woman who was typically very mild-mannered. She was sweet and gentle and not one to "act out," as they say.

Actually, it's all understandable. Who would want a stranger coming to the door and telling me he or she is going to give me a bath. But caregivers need to do something, and often an in-home agency can be a good choice. Some agencies are more careful than others about the consistency of caregivers. That helps immensely, as then that person arriving means "bath time," and if the person's memory isn't too bad, they may even remember the caregiver who arrives. But we weren't so fortunate.

There are different approaches to take, once you've figured out why bathing is such a big deal. If a doctor finds the elder is depressed and antidepressants work, the problem may solve itself. A renewed interest in life may make the person more aware of needing (or wanting) a shower or bath and clean clothes. Energy may increase and that, too, helps.

If you find you are in a power struggle with the elder refusing to be "bossed around," a little diplomacy can come in handy. If the elder has a good friend, it sometimes works to get the friend to give a call and say, "Hey, Mable. Shower up and put on your newest outfit. We need to go out and have lunch." A reason to get cleaned up for someone besides family, coupled by an "I don't care what you smell or look like if you don't" attitude by the son or daughter, can sometimes do the trick.

If you can still get them in the shower, but they are afraid of the water (or sitting in the tub), there are many types of shower chairs available. These are wise for anyone who is getting older or who may have arthritis or balance problems, as it decreases the risk of falls. A hand-held shower head helps a lot with the fear factor if the person doesn't have water pouring down from overhead.

However, if the person is in a demented state and afraid in the bath, then you or another person must move gently. Don't insist on a shower or bath. Begin with just asking to wipe off the person's face. Gradually move to under arms and other parts of the body, talking and telling them what you are doing, as you go. Be soothing. If they fight it or say stop, then stop. Try again later. You may at least get to a stage where there is an occasional sponge bath.

The thing to remember about cleanliness is that you may have to lower your standards. It's hard. You know that at one time Mom would have been humiliated if she didn't smell good, or had stains on her clothes. That part of you, due to kindness, wants to take over and have her look like she'd have wanted to look.



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The other part, though, is that she is now in a different mode. Too much nagging is counterproductive. If Mom isn't as sweet smelling as you'd like, or if Dad has stains on his shirt because he spills – well you all may have to live with it. Constant arguing about cleanliness and clothes can make the person feel belittled, and that won't help at all. They will not take it as love. They will take it a criticism. So, compromise may be in order.

The main message? Outsiders understand better than you think they do. Do your best to help your elders look nice and stay clean. But don't expect a pristine appearance. It's often not realistic, and the issue may be more about your own ego than about the elder. Think it through, be honest with yourself, and find a way to live with what you must. It's once again attitude adjustment time.