

Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

Willie Wellness: What You Need To Know In Order To Provide Effective Care, Down There, For Men With Disabilities



By: Dave Hingsburger

She was blushing and clearly uncomfortable. To her credit, she did not let her embarrassment stop her from doing her job. “He told me that his girlfriend complained that his penis wasn’t clean enough. He’s asked me if I knew how a man keeps it clean. I don’t know what to tell him.” As we talked it became clear that she’d never anticipated that, when working in a home with four men, that she’d have to answer questions that, as a 22 year old woman, she hadn’t anticipated being asked. Her experience was echoed in a study done in 2009 that showed that female care providers were given very little education in penile care which resulted in painful mistakes that could have been avoided with a little training.

It’s not uncommon for direct support professionals to be providing support for people twice their age and people of opposite gender. Questions from a 50 year old woman to a 20 year old man, or the reverse, as was the case with the woman who came into my office, can cause embarrassment and a lack of practical knowledge. This article is one that begins to discuss providing men with support specific to their needs as men. The subject of men’s health is a huge one, so this article is just a start. Follow up articles will deal with other health issues and with more “how to’s” for teaching. Consider this just a fact sheet about men’s private parts and information that you may need to provide information.

This article does not intend to diagnose. All medical concerns should be referred to a doctor. This information is intended to provide information, nothing more.

Willie Wellness

There are a lot of myths about the relationship between a man and his penis – but there isn’t much dialogue about the kinds of things that men need to do in order to keep their privates clean, healthy and in full working order. It might be a surprise to learn that men, exactly like women, worry about ensuring that their bodies smell clean and fresh. Men are equally concerned with sexual health and wellness. Some men with intellectual disabilities have had very little actual instruction about how to keep themselves clean and what to do to keep themselves healthy. Here are a few tips.

The penis and its chums, the testicles, are sensitive, a point that needs to be remembered. Some men with disabilities have done real damage by washing their members with harsh soap and water and by scrubbing vigorously. One man said that he had been told his whole life that his penis was dirty, he had been scrubbing with a washcloth and soap for years but did real damage when he began to use a powerful chemical cleaner. It was only then that it was discovered what he’d been doing to himself. He needed to learn two things: first his penis and testicles were not ‘dirty’ and did not need scrubbing, second how to wash gently. Here’s some tips about gentle effective cleaning:

- 1) Simple washing with warm water is effective.
- 2) If necessary a mild soap or a non-soap product such as glycerine cream can be used.
- 3) Uncircumcised men should slide the foreskin back and wash only with warm water.
- 4) Dry the area very well.
- 5) Gentleness throughout the process is important. If it hurts, it's being done wrongly.
- 6) Dry genitals gently, do not rub vigorously with a towel, pat dry, taking care to ensure that the area under the foreskin is dry.
- 7) Washing can be too frequent.
- 8) Washing can not be frequent enough.
- 9) If it's too frequent or not frequent enough it is possible to develop an inflammation of the penis or glans. In this case do NOT use any scented soap or shower gel. Try warm salt water instead.
- 10) DO NOT use talc or deodorant as both can cause irritation and talc can get under the foreskin.

Taking good care of the penis is important in a man's daily routine. Many men with disabilities use irritants thinking that these will help cut down on smells. Regular thorough washing with warm water and mild soap is all that's really necessary.

Checking Out

Testicular cancer is one of the most treatable cancers, but chances of survival increase significantly the earlier it is caught. While it occurs most frequently with boys and men between the ages of 15 and 35, it can happen at any age. There are a variety of symptoms to be aware of:

- 1) A lump on the testicle, typically painless
- 2) A swelling of a testicle
- 3) A hardening of the testicle.
- 4) A subtle change in how the testicle feels to the touch
- 5) A build-up of fluid within the scrotum
- 6) Pain or discomfort in the testicle or scrotum
- 7) A scrotum that feels heavy or swollen
- 8) A dull ache in either the groin or the lower abdomen
- 9) Bigger or more tender breasts

Any of these need to be reported to a doctor for a check up. The most common symptom that leads to a doctor's visit is the lump on the testicle. This can either be found by a partner during sexual play or it can be found during washing or cleaning. The most effective way to check out testicular health is to do a self examination. The steps are fairly simple:

- 1) Do on a monthly basis, regular exams will allow you to get to know the 'normal' feel of your testes and therefore make you more able to distinguish when something changes
- 2) Do the examination after a hot bath or shower as this relaxes the scrotum and makes the self examination easier
- 3) Examine one testicle at a time

- 4) Roll testicle around with the fingers of both hands
- 5) Become familiar with the typical shape and feel of the testicle
- 6) Note the epididymis which is a soft and rope like, it attaches to the testicle at the back part of the top of each testicle. This is normal.
- 7) Note that one testicle, usually the right one, is larger than the other. This is normal.
- 8) Feel for hard lumps or nodules, these can be as small as a grain of rice, or as large as a pea.
- 9) Any lumps or changes in the size or shape or feel of the testicle needs to be reported to the doctor. Remember cancer isn't always detected by a 'lump.' Be particularly aware especially if the testicle feels unusually hard.
- 10) Keep a record of the examinations so that you can ensure that you don't miss doing them, this will also allow you to tell the doctor the length of time between examinations if you do find something to be investigated.

Men with intellectual disabilities may need to be assured that doing this is a healthy normal thing. Some who grew up in sex negative environments may feel that what they are doing is 'masturbating' and therefore 'wrong'. Some education around health and wellness may need to be done, it may be a good idea to involve the doctor in this discussion so that the individual can connect the activity to something 'medical' or for 'health' or 'that the doctor said to do' and these may reduce the anxieties about touching private parts.

Play Time

Masturbation is a perfectly natural behaviour. However, many men with disabilities have not learned either that it is normal or that there are things that they can use to make masturbation both safe and enjoyable. For a lot of men with disabilities, the only private time they had was in the shower and some may have learned to use soap and water as a lubricant. This isn't highly recommended as soap can get in the urethra and cause pain. It can also carry over into other environments. Should a man with a disability take a bottle of shampoo or a bar of soap into his room to use to masturbate he can damage the skin on his genitals. There are a number of things that can be used as a lubricant for masturbation. "Dry" masturbation can cause real damage to the skin of the penis and therefore some kind of lubrication is necessary. Here are some ideas for what to use and what to avoid:

- 1) Use a water based lubricant, the same type that would be used with a condom during sex. The advantage with this is that this lubricant can be used for both masturbating and for sexual intercourse. Others on this list can not be used with a condom.
- 2) Do not use anything with alcohol. It burns. It dries quickly.
- 3) No soap, no shampoo, no hand sanitizers.
- 4) Hot and cold things can cause irritation.
- 5) Hand creams can be used, many suggest that lotions containing Aloe or Aloe Vera is healthy for the skin and can act as a good lubricant.
- 6) When using lubricants, remember to wash off after masturbating.

Sexual Health

While any sexually active man should be practicing safer sex, and discussing with their doctor any need for testing for Sexually Transmitted Infections, some men discover them through symptoms. These symptoms should not be ignored and treatment needs to be sought quickly:

- 1) Any discharge from the penis – can be either thick or watery, can vary in colour
- 2) Changes to the smell or colour of the semen
- 3) Pain when urinating or ejaculating.
- 4) Any pain in the pelvic area.
- 5) Sores on the genitals, anus, tongue, and/or throat.
- 6) Flesh-colored or reddish bumps, sores or blisters on the skin of the genitals that may or may not itch.
- 7) Small blisters that turn into scabs on the genital area.
- 8) Soft, flesh-colored, cauliflower-like warts around the genital area.

Again, it's unwise to have unsafe sex but if you do should you notice a flu-like symptoms: sore throat, swollen glands, fever, or body aches following unprotected sex, it would be wise to have a test for STI's. However, **regardless of symptoms, you should test for STI's after every unprotected sexual encounter.**

Wigging Out

Sex education classes often don't teach about what happens as the aging process firmly takes root. For men with disabilities, and for men in general, some of things may come as a surprise. It's important to know which changes are just part of the aging process and which are concerning. Further, there are solutions to some of the things that we have in store for us as men: Some changes and some solutions:

- 1) Loss of pubic hair – yep, just like up top, you go grey, you go bald. Hair loss is a normal part of the process.
- 2) Change in penis size (part one): If men put on weight over the years the penis can look like it's losing length when it's flaccid. This is simply because of body fat and with lost weight, the penis will resume its normal size.
- 3) Change in penis size (part two): Men's erections, as they age, lose a bit in length and a bit in girth. This is because of blood flow, is normal, and is irreversible.
- 4) Drips and dribbles: After urination men can find that they get all dressed up again and, oops, a bit of urine spills out. Well, the tap doesn't turn off quite so well any more. What this is though isn't urine from the bladder, it's urine from the urethra that didn't get fully expelled. There are some hints to help with this:
 - a) Always urinate through the fly, not over underwear with elastic waistbands. There needs to be no extra barrier for the urine to pass through.
 - b) Learn to milk the urine from the penis, this is a simple process that takes only an extra minute or two. With one hand place some pressure behind the scrotum and push out remaining urine. Make sure you finish by running two fingers from the base to tip of the penis, squeezing out the last drops.

- c) There are kegel exercises that men can do to increase their muscle control, speak to a doctor about the benefits of these.
 - d) Wear black pants.
- 5) Change in urine flow: The older men get the closer to the toilet they should stand.

Some of these symptoms can seem scary but when it's clear they are part of the aging process, then it is reassuring to have the information available. What's important though, is that men with disabilities be encouraged to ask questions regarding sex and sexuality throughout the lifespan. We all should be able to ask these questions! It's important to know that as we age, as we change, we have differing concerns and that we can seek out information when we need it.

Conclusion

This is only the start of a series of articles about men's health and wellness. When this article was begun, the idea was NOT to have a newsletter just about the penis, however, there was so much information that we didn't want to sell the topic short. So stay tuned for more about helping the men in your care to stay healthy!

Reference:

N. J. Wilson, S. Cumella, T. R. Parmenter, R. J. Stancliffe & R. P. Shuttleworth (2009) Penile hygiene: puberty, paraphimosis and personal care for men and boys with an intellectual disability; Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, Vol. 53 Part 2 pp 106 - 114

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