

Bowel and Bladder Management

Many people who use wheelchairs and cannot transfer independently struggle with how to use the bathroom. Even if you have someone with you to provide assistance, there are times when the bathroom is not large enough, is not accessible, or is not unisex when your helper is the opposite sex. For these and other reasons, many people restrict liquids on an ongoing basis or only travel short distances. This becomes limiting when you need to do things in the community, including going to school and work. It is also unhealthy and can result in frequent urinary tract infections (UTIs).

The following information is gathered from articles, interviews and personal experience. **It is not meant to be an exhaustive list of options or a medical opinion.** It is only meant to provide a range of strategies that work for some people.

Bowel Management

A common method of addressing bowel issues is to develop a **bowel regimen**. This means that you develop a system of having bowel movements at scheduled times. Many people do this at night or first thing in the morning before they leave home to reduce the need to use the bathroom at other times. Of course, Mother Nature sometimes chooses to not cooperate. However, many people use their system successfully, with the result that they will not be likely to need a public bathroom for bowel movements.

There are a number of methods used for bowel regimens. They range from glycerin suppositories, to prepackaged enemas, to products advertised as "magic bullets." A physical therapist, occupational therapist or physiatrist who works in rehabilitation medicine can also provide up-to-date information about starting a bowel regimen.

Bladder Management

As stated above, many people find themselves limiting their activities or their intake of liquids because it is difficult to use the bathroom. It can also be challenging to make sure there is always someone around to assist with toileting or to always be near an accessible bathroom. The following are a few options.

- You may choose to use an **absorbent adult diaper (i.e. Depends)** or an **absorbent pad (i.e. Poise)**. This is often the option offered when you are in a rehabilitation, hospital or nursing home setting. It is used when there is limited access to someone to help with transfers on and off the toilet. However, this may not be the best approach when you are going to be away from home for extended periods. First, you are forced to sit in your own waste. This can lead to skin breakdown and produce an unpleasant odor. Secondly, the diaper usually does not completely absorb the contents of a full bladder and people end up restricting their liquid intake anyway.
- Doctors often prefer **intermittent catheterization**. However, this can be very

difficult or impossible to do independently if you have limited mobility. If you have difficulty repositioning yourself in your chair or have limited use of your hands, this may not be an option. People who use intermittent catheterization and cannot do so independently will need someone to assist. So this can present some of the same problems as transferring in regard to access and assistance.

- An **indwelling catheter** through the urethra is an answer for many people. You would wear a "leg bag" to collect the urine. This small waterproof bag is attached to your leg with straps and can be emptied into a toilet or urinal. People who cannot use their hands to empty the bag can either use a mechanism to empty it, or conceal a larger bag under your chair to be emptied when you have assistance. This can allow you to have longer periods of independence.
- If you cannot tolerate other forms of catheterization, a **suprapubic catheter** can be introduced into the bladder through a small opening in the abdomen wall. This is a surgical procedure where the wall of the bladder is brought up to the abdomen wall. An incision is made in both and they are sewn to one another leaving a small opening. The catheter is then inserted through the abdomen wall into the bladder. A small balloon is inflated at the end of the catheter to keep it from sliding out and then the catheter is attached to a bag to collect the urine. The catheter is then changed periodically by deflating the balloon, removing the catheter and inserting a new one. This change can be done at home with minimal instruction.
- Men may have an easier time when it comes to urinating. A **portable urinal** can be used from a seated position and emptied into a toilet. The intermittent and indwelling catheters may also be used with little change of position. There are also some **external catheters** for males ("condom catheters") that come in a number of varieties. It would be advisable to try a number of brands to determine which is best for you.
- Another approach is to **be creative about how you schedule commitments** throughout the day. If you do not constantly need to run to the bathroom, it may be possible to organize classes or work around one midday bathroom break. Some people choose self-employment because of the flexibility you can build into your workday. Telecommuting, consulting, tutoring and freelancing are just some of the careers that become attractive when considering issues that may arise if you have a disability.

Summary

Management of bowel and bladder needs involve important decisions that you must discuss with a doctor, physical therapist or occupational therapist. Medical personnel are often reluctant to use some of these methods because they do not want to risk introducing bacteria into the body. However, when you restrict your liquid intake you risk acquiring urinary tract infections (UTIs). Your quality-of-life issues must be addressed when you are looking at ways to leave your home for school, work or community involvement. Even if you have someone to help, there is no guarantee that you will always be able to find accessible bathrooms or that help can be provided safely in a less-than-ideal environment.

This is a lot to think about. It may take a significant amount of time to work out the most suitable option. So the best suggestion is to start addressing this as soon as possible so that you will know your accommodation needs before you go for your first interview and can be ready for employment opportunities when they arise.