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**Incontinence-Associated Dermatitis: Adverse event sequelae, cost and prevention.**

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## **Abstract**

Incontinence-associated dermatitis (IAD) is a common problem in patients with faecal and/or urinary incontinence. Urine alters the normal skin flora and increases permeability of the stratum corneum and faecal enzymes on the skin contribute to skin damage. Faecal bacteria can then penetrate the skin, increasing the risk of secondary infection. However, IAD can be prevented and healed with timely and appropriate skin cleansing and skin protection. This includes appropriate use of containment devices. HARTMANN incontinence pads have been developed to absorb the fluids that cause IAD and maintain the skin's acidic pH. The acidic pH of the skin contributes to its barrier function and defence against infection. Therefore, maintaining an acidic pH will help protect the skin from damage.

## **Key phrases**

The incidence of IAD in people in long term care, acute care and the community is high.

Treatment of IAD increases the cost of providing incontinence care and decreases patients' quality of life.

IAD incidence can be significantly reduced by effective preventative measures that involve correct implementation of a structured skin care protocol.

Incontinence pads with curly fibre technology may assist with effective skin care protocols to prevent IAD and effective skin care protocols to prevent IAD and have associated benefits for the patient's quality of life and for healthcare providers.

## **Key words**

Incontinence associated dermatitis; Prevention; Skin care protocol; Acidic pH; Incontinence pads; Curly fibres

## **Conflict of interest**

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## Introduction

Skin moisture is not necessarily damaging. But when moisture that contains irritating substances, such as alkaline urine, contacts the skin for a prolonged period, damage can occur (Ousey et al, 2016). Incontinence-associated dermatitis (IAD) is one of the clinical manifestations of moisture-associated skin damage and is a common problem in patients with faecal and/or urinary incontinence (Voegeli, 2013). Therefore, IAD is often encountered by nursing staff and is an important issue for nurses to be aware of. Incontinence causes disruption of the skin barrier function and leads to superficial skin damage (Figure 1). This occurs because of the effects of urine, faeces, and containment devices on the skin (Gray et al, 2012). The skin's pH contributes to its barrier function and defence against infection; an ideal pH is 5.0 to 5.9 (Boer et al, 2016). Urine pH ranges from 4.5 to 8.0; the higher range is alkaline and contributes to skin damage (Larner et al, 2015).

Nurses should know that IAD can be prevented and healed with timely and appropriate skin cleansing and skin protection (Gray et al, 2012; Beeckman et al, 2015). Prevention and treatment should also focus on a proper use of incontinence containment materials (Fader et al, 2008). Products with fluid handling and removal properties may be considered as an adjunct to a structured skin care regimen to help avoid occlusion and over-hydration of the stratum corneum (Beeckman et al, 2015). HARTMANN incontinence pads have been developed in line with a technology that enables absorption of the fluids that cause IAD and also chemically maintains pH such that tissue damage is very much reduced (Beguin et al, 2010; Bliss et al, 2016).

### *Incidence/prevalence of incontinence and IAD*

It is estimated that in the UK up to half a million adults may experience faecal incontinence (Harari et al, 2014) and between three and six-million people in the UK may have urinary incontinence (Withington et al, 2014). Most detailed studies of incontinence prevalence have been undertaken internationally, and they suggest that up to 79% of residents in nursing homes and 35% of community-dwelling adults have been found to experience incontinence (Newman et al, 2007; Langemo et al, 2011), putting them at risk of IAD. The prevalence of IAD varies dramatically depending on the setting with international surveys suggesting rates between 5.6% and 50%, while the incidence is 3.4% to 25 % (Gray et al, 2012). However, it can be difficult to truly estimate these levels as most studies involve small samples in specific settings. This is in part because IAD is not well defined; until recently there was no international agreement on the name of the condition and IAD does not have a separate code in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10<sup>th</sup> version, 2007 (ICD-10) where it is grouped as diaper dermatitis (Beeckman, 2016). Meanwhile, incontinence is not well reported because it is not considered to be a medical diagnosis, but rather a nursing diagnosis or care problem (Halfens et al, 2013).

Details from the National Prevalence Measurement of Care Problems in Austria and the Netherlands suggest that both urinary and faecal incontinence are more prevalent in nursing homes than hospitals with around 10-15% of patients in hospitals and 55-75% in nursing homes experiencing urinary incontinence. The prevalence of faecal incontinence is around 10% in hospital and 30-60% in nursing homes (Halfens et al, 2013). Long et al (2012) presented information on 171 patients admitted to a long-term care facility in Cincinnati, Ohio, USA. 39 had IAD on admission (prevalence of 22.8%). The incidence of IAD in those without IAD at admission was 7.6% at 12 weeks. Junkin and Selekof (2007) in a survey of acute care patients in Lincoln, NE, USA found that the overall prevalence of incontinence was 19.7% in 608 patients, in those who were incontinent 42.5% had

skin injury. Campbell et al (2016) investigated acute care patients in Australia and found a 24% prevalence of incontinence and that IAD occurred in 42% of patients who were incontinent. Hall and Clark (2015) found an incidence of 29.4% IAD in patient with incontinence in neurotrauma intensive care and progressive care units in Virginia, USA. This was reduced to 0% after the implementation of an education programme involving best practice for prevention and treatment for incontinence cleansing.

Incontinence is also a problem for nurses working in the community. Rohwer et al (2013) found that in 189 community-living individuals in Minnesota, USA with faecal incontinence, 52.5% experienced IAD. Bliss et al (2015) found that in 98 community-living individuals with faecal incontinence that did not experience IAD at the beginning of the study, the incidence of IAD was 41% (40 of the 98) over 52 days.

#### *Conditions associated with IAD*

The data above shows that there is a high incidence of IAD in people with incontinence but nurses should be aware that there are certain conditions that may be associated with a particularly high risk of IAD (Table 1, Voegeli, 2016). A recent review suggested that there are 27 individual risk factors for IAD but nine were identified as priorities: urinary incontinence, faecal incontinence, double incontinence, perineal environment, toileting ability, tissue tolerance, skin pH, the use of absorbent products and absence of structured skin care (Heywood and Holloway, 2014).

More research is needed in this area as some of the risk factors remain controversial and the level of evidence for many factors is low. Kottner et al (2014) found IAD was more likely to occur in males than females, those individuals with diabetes mellitus, those with a higher BMI, those with faecal incontinence rather than urinary incontinence or those showing a high degree of functional and psychical impairments. Campbell et al (2016) suggested that faecal incontinence was not more likely to be a risk factor for IAD but they did find that patients with semi-formed or liquid stool were more likely to have IAD than those with formed stool, they also found no association with the frequency of incontinence. However, Rohwer et al (2013) support the view that faecal incontinence and frequency of incontinence episodes are risk factors for IAD. Animal models also support this view with increased irritation of the skin being due to digestive enzymes in faecal matter (Gray et al, 2012).

It also remains debatable whether ageing plays a role, and ageing is associated with many of the risk factors of IAD. Kottner et al (2014) and Rohwer et al (2013) found no association between IAD and ageing, but Campbell et al (2016) did. Animal studies suggest that ageing enhances skin maceration and the ultrastructural alteration of the epidermis a major risk factor for impairing skin barrier function and IAD (Minematsu et al, 2011). Aging also increases the pH of the skin, which is in itself a major reason for urine causing skin damage (Hachem et al, 2005; Trojahn et al, 2015). There is a higher reported incidence of IAD in the elderly (Le-Lievre, 2001; Kottner and Beeckman, 2015) but this could be a reflection of the increased levels of incontinence in the population in this study.

#### *The implications of IAD*

Patients with IAD experience discomfort and pain that is likely to diminish their quality of life (Jacobson and Wright, 2015). As IAD decreases the skin's protective barrier, this makes the area much more prone to infection. The most common infections involve *Candida* sp. and *Staphylococcus aureus*; with fungal infection being very common (Campbell et al, 2016). Infection means IAD takes

longer to be successfully treated (Bliss et al, 2007). Cases of IAD result in longer hospital stays (Chatham and Carls, 2012; Lewis-Byers and Thayer, 2002). Additionally, pain increases patient morbidity and may cause a lack of adherence to required interventions (Junkin and Selekof, 2008). This may in turn impact upon the effectiveness of treatment, and lead to further complications.

There is some debate over whether IAD increases the risk of pressure ulcer (PU) development but current evidence suggests that this may be the case (Beeckman et al, 2014). Patients who develop PU experience severe pain, restricted activity and prolonged periods of hospitalisation (Gorecki et al, 2009).

Nurses should be aware that PUs and IAD are sometimes misidentified and confused because they may co-exist and present in a similar manner, but they have distinct aetiologies and treatment strategies, so it is important to distinguish between them (Hall et al, 2015; Beeckman 2016). Cases of PUs occur when deeper skin tissue is affected by pressure or shear and the vulnerability of the skin to PU development is increased by moisture (Beeckman et al, 2014). Education is important to assist health professionals with correct identification and treatment of IAD and/or PUs.

### *Prevention and treatment of IAD*

The first step for nurses in preventing IAD should be identification of incontinence and its appropriate management (Voegeli, 2016). Appropriate management can involve improving mobility, medication, use of indwelling catheters and external collection devices (Gray et al, 2016). If incontinence cannot be reversed, then prevention of IAD involves removal of the irritant and moisture and augmentation of the skin's barrier function (Beeckman, 2016) summarised as follows:

- Routinely use a defined skin care regimen
- Timely and gentle cleansing of soiling
- Apply moisturiser especially on dry skin
- Apply protectant to areas that might come into contact with urine or faeces

Therefore, skin cleansing to remove urine or stool and their enzymes and microorganisms is important, alongside application of skin moisturiser and application of a skin barrier to prevent skin breakdown (Kottner et al, 2013). Cleansing should involve a product with a pH as close to that of normal skin as possible and an optimal skin care regimen should be undertaken following each major incontinence event (Beeckman et al, 2009).

Evidence suggests that perineal skin cleansers are most effective for skin cleansing (Beeckman et al, 2009). Then creams, ointments, lotions and films all show efficacy as a protective barrier (Beeckman, 2016). For removal of urine or stool from the skin appropriate use of incontinence containment materials can be effective, including the use of incontinence pads and devices (Macaulay et al, 2015; Nazarko, 2015; Payne, 2015; Fader et al, 2008). However, further research is needed to evaluate which methods and products are most suitable for different patients and situations. Nevertheless, implementation of a structured skin care protocol is the major reason for decreased incidence of IAD in many studies (Hall and Clark, 2015; Bale et al, 2004; Bates-Jensen et al, 2003; Hunter et al, 2003). However, Nix and Ermer-Seltun (2004) found that few skin care protocols were implemented correctly with many omitting the use of a protective skin barrier. This could be because in some cases excess use of barrier products have been found to clog incontinence pads and causing them not to work (Voegeli, 2016). Therefore, it is critical that nurses follow the guidelines for the correct use of barrier creams.

Treatment and prevention strategies for IAD are generally similar but for complex IAD antifungals or antibiotics may be required to treat a secondary infection. This may also involve additional diagnostic tests (Chatham and Carls, 2012).

#### *The costs associated with IAD*

To our knowledge there has been no study undertaken to evaluate the true economic cost of IAD in the UK. The high rates of incontinence result in a large economic burden worldwide, estimates range between 0.89 and 1.74 USD per episode of incontinence (Bliss et al, 2007) or skin-assessment scale costs of 28.36 Euro to 98.06 Euro (Baatenburg de Jong & Admiraal, 2004). However, the cost of IAD to healthcare providers and patients can be difficult to measure accurately. This is because prevention and treatment of IAD when they occur can involve similar protocols, the economic benefit of preventing IAD may be considered to be minimal. However, the pain and discomfort encountered by the patient with IAD should not be discounted, as it is likely to require medication and longer hospital stays involve increased use of supplies and nursing care (Chatham and Carls, 2012; Junkin and Selekof, 2008; Lewis-Byers and Thayer, 2002). This suggests that IAD will have a large economic burden in the UK, which may be offset by providing preventative care.

Costs can be lowered by careful choice of an effective care regimen. Studies show that use of a polymer based skin barrier film compared to ointment or cream reduces costs because it is only applied three times a week rather than daily (Bliss et al, 2007; Baatenburg de Jong and Admiraal, 2004).

#### *HARTMANN incontinence briefs with curly fibre*

Containment devices, otherwise known as incontinence briefs, are multilayer disposable garments containing a superabsorbent polymer designed to wick and trap moisture. They can form an important part of a carefully controlled IAD prevention strategy but, by trapping heat and moisture, may cause redness and inflammation that can progress to skin erosion (Payne, 2015). Fortunately, newer products with improved fluid handling properties can avoid occlusion and over-hydration of the stratum corneum, and this could complement an effective skin care regimen (Beekman et al, 2015). Appropriate use of containment devices includes correct fitting and measurement of the appropriate brief size, regular monitoring of incontinence episodes to change the containment device once wetting has occurred and regular assessment of the skin (Beekman et al, 2015).

In order to address the demands of preventing IAD, HARTMANN have developed incontinence pads that enable absorption of the fluids that result from incontinence and maintain an acidic pH (Beguin et al, 2010; Bliss et al, 2016). Similar to other incontinence pads, they should be changed after each episode of incontinence, but they are designed to reduce skin damage by removing the fluid and maintaining the skin pH immediately when an episode occurs. The curly fibre technology, which is pH 5.5 spiral shaped cellulose fibre contained within the upper layer of the pad material and sits directly next to the skin, buffers the pH of the incontinence voids and also helps draw and distribute fluids into the superabsorbent core (Figure 2). Using these pads significantly lowered the pH of skin exposed to an alkaline solution with pH similar to urine/faeces, while standard briefs did not (Bliss et al, 2016). However, careful monitoring of the skin condition of patients with incontinence is still required (Beekman et al, 2015).

The acidic pH of the skin surface and the difference in pH between the skin surface and the deeper layers of the skin control the skin's microbiological flora. The growth and density of bacteria and fungi increase as the pH increases (Boer et al, 2016). The correct pH also helps maintain correct hydration of the epidermis and increased pH corresponds with increased transepidermal water loss, an

important indicator of epidermal barrier function (Boer et al, 2016). Skin pH plays an important role in the surface structure and stability of the stratum corneum's extracellular matrix lipids (Plasencia et al, 2007). The benefits of a low pH in protecting the skin have led some studies to consider using an acidic skin cleanser to improve barrier function (Duncan et al, 2013; Blaak et al, 2011).

As maintenance of an acidic pH protects patients from skin damage, incontinence pads with curly fibre may improve skin care protocols that are essential for protecting patients from IAD through management of incontinence and skin health protection. This would reduce the incidence of IAD in at risk patients and reduce the cost of treating IAD. Further research is required to quantify the benefits.

## Conclusion

The high prevalence of incontinence in people in long term care, acute care and even in the community suggests that the incidence of IAD is also high. This results in a high cost, in terms of money and quality of life. However, IAD incidence can be significantly reduced by effective preventative measures that involve correct implementation of a structured skin care protocol. The use of HARTMANN incontinence pads with curly fibre technology assists with maintaining an acidic pH. As skin pH is a factor in incidence of IAD, this suggests there are benefits for both the patient and the organisation.

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**Figure 1:** Example of incontinence associated dermatitis (IAD) that had developed in a patient whose skin was contaminated with urine containing a large amount of sediment that had bypassed her indwelling urinary catheter.

**Figure 2:** Incontinence briefs with curly fibre technology from HARTMANN. **A:** Curly fibre before incorporation into the brief. **B:** Dignity briefs ① Inner cuff system, ② Hypo-allergenic materials, ③ Air active material, ④ The 3-layer absorbent core, ⑤ Super-absorbent polymer, ⑥ Soft, cloth-like back-sheet. **C:** Three-layer design of the incontinence pads. **D:** Curly fibre method of action.