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Urinary Tract Infection (UTI) Awareness in Care Settings

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 067

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Introduction

A urinary tract infection (**UTI**) is an infection affecting part of the urinary system. This may include the **bladder, urethra or kidneys**. UTIs are common, particularly among some older people and individuals receiving health or social care.

Symptoms vary from person to person. Some individuals may experience pain or burning when passing urine, needing to urinate more frequently or urgently, lower abdominal discomfort or feeling generally unwell.

Care staff are **not responsible for diagnosing a UTI**. Their role is to recognise possible changes, record relevant observations, report concerns promptly and support the individual according to their care plan and professional guidance.

Why This Resource Matters

Understanding UTI awareness helps care staff to:

- Recognise possible signs and symptoms of a urinary tract infection.
- Understand factors that may increase an individual's risk of developing a UTI.
- Observe changes in urinary patterns and general wellbeing.
- Support appropriate hydration according to the individual's care plan.
- Promote good personal and continence care.
- Understand the additional considerations for individuals with urinary catheters.
- Recognise that sudden confusion or behavioural change can have many possible causes.
- Avoid assuming that cloudy or strong-smelling urine alone confirms a UTI.
- Record and report concerns accurately.
- Recognise signs of significant deterioration or possible sepsis.
- Know when urgent or emergency medical assistance may be required.

Possible Signs and Symptoms

Possible symptoms of a UTI may include:

- Pain or a burning sensation when passing urine.
- Needing to pass urine more frequently than usual.
- A sudden or increased urgency to pass urine.
- Passing urine more often during the night.
- Lower abdominal discomfort.
- Blood visible in the urine.
- Feeling generally unwell, tired or weak.
- Fever, shivering or feeling unusually hot or cold.
- Pain in the back or side, particularly around the kidney area.
- Nausea or vomiting in some circumstances.

Symptoms should always be considered alongside the individual's **usual condition and overall wellbeing**.

Confusion and UTIs

Sudden confusion in an older person is sometimes assumed to mean they have a UTI. However, **confusion alone does not confirm a urinary tract infection**.

A sudden change in mental state may indicate **delirium** and can have many possible causes, including infection, dehydration, constipation, pain, medication-related problems or other acute illness.

Care staff should therefore:

- Recognise sudden confusion as a significant change.
- Observe for other symptoms or changes in the person's condition.
- Record what has changed accurately.
- Report concerns promptly.
- Follow the individual's care plan and organisational escalation procedures.

Key Message

Do not diagnose a UTI based on one symptom alone.

Changes in urine appearance or smell, or sudden confusion, may have several possible causes.

The care worker's role is to **observe the whole person, recognise changes from their usual condition, record accurately and report concerns appropriately** so that clinical assessment can be obtained when required.

Understanding UTI Risk and Prevention

Some individuals may be more likely to develop urinary tract infections because of their health, mobility, continence needs or other circumstances.

Factors that may increase the risk of a UTI can include:

- Difficulty emptying the bladder completely.
- Urinary incontinence.
- Having a urinary catheter.
- Reduced mobility.
- Dehydration or inadequate fluid intake.
- Certain long-term health conditions.
- Changes affecting the urinary system.
- Poor personal hygiene or inappropriate continence care.

Having one or more risk factors does **not** mean that an individual has a UTI. Care staff should focus on appropriate prevention measures and recognise changes from the person's usual condition.

Supporting Good Urinary Health

Care staff can help support urinary health through good everyday care.

Where appropriate to the individual's care plan:

- Encourage adequate hydration.
- Make drinks readily accessible.
- Support regular opportunities to use the toilet.
- Respond promptly when an individual requests toileting assistance.
- Promote independence with toileting wherever possible.
- Provide dignified and effective continence care.
- Maintain good personal hygiene.
- Change soiled continence products promptly.
- Follow infection prevention and hand hygiene procedures.
- Observe and report significant changes in urinary patterns or general wellbeing.

Some individuals may have a **clinically prescribed fluid restriction** because of another health condition. Staff should always follow the individual's care plan rather than automatically encouraging additional fluids.

Catheters and UTI Risk

Individuals with urinary catheters have an increased risk of developing a **catheter-associated urinary tract infection (CAUTI)**.

Where catheter care forms part of the care worker's role, staff should:

- Follow the individual's catheter care plan.
- Perform hand hygiene before and after appropriate catheter-related care.
- Keep the drainage system positioned and managed according to the care plan.
- Avoid unnecessary disconnection of the drainage system.
- Ensure tubing is not kinked or obstructed.
- Observe urine drainage where required.
- Maintain dignity and good personal hygiene.
- Report pain, leakage, blockage, blood, reduced drainage or other concerns promptly.

Care staff should only undertake catheter-related procedures for which they are **trained, competent and authorised**.

Antibiotics and UTIs

If a healthcare professional diagnoses a UTI, the individual may be prescribed antibiotics where clinically appropriate.

Care staff should:

- Support prescribed antibiotics according to the medication instructions and MAR.
- Administer medication only when trained, competent and authorised.
- Ensure doses are documented correctly.
- Observe for possible side effects or deterioration.
- Report concerns according to organisational procedures.
- Never use antibiotics prescribed for another person or from a previous illness.

Antibiotics should only be used when prescribed for the individual.

Recognising Possible Deterioration

A person with a suspected or confirmed UTI may become increasingly unwell.

Be alert to significant changes such as:

- Increasing weakness or reduced mobility.
- Fever, shivering or feeling very cold.
- Persistent vomiting.
- Increasing pain.
- Reduced urine output.
- New or worsening confusion.
- Unusual drowsiness or difficulty waking.
- Rapid breathing or breathlessness.
- A significant overall deterioration in the person's condition.

These changes should be **reported promptly** and escalated according to the individual's care plan and organisational procedures.

Remember

Good UTI awareness is about more than checking urine.

Care staff should consider the **whole person**, understand what is normal for them and recognise significant changes in their health, behaviour and everyday functioning.

Good hydration where appropriate, effective continence and catheter care, infection prevention and **prompt reporting of deterioration** can all contribute to safer care.

Professional Responsibilities

Care staff have an important role in recognising changes that may indicate a urinary tract infection (**UTI**) or another health problem. Staff should understand what is normal for the individual, follow their care plan and report significant changes promptly.

As a care professional, you should always:

- Treat the individual with dignity, privacy and respect.
- Know the person's usual urinary pattern and general level of wellbeing where relevant to your role.
- Follow the individual's care and continence plans.
- Support appropriate hydration according to the person's individual requirements.
- Never override a clinically prescribed fluid restriction.
- Provide prompt and dignified toileting assistance.
- Follow good personal hygiene and infection prevention procedures.
- Follow catheter care procedures when trained, competent and authorised.
- Observe for changes in urination, pain, temperature, behaviour or general wellbeing.
- Avoid diagnosing a UTI based solely on urine appearance, smell or confusion.
- Support prescribed medication only when trained, competent and authorised.
- Record observations accurately and objectively.
- Report concerns promptly and follow organisational escalation procedures.

When to Raise Concerns

Report concerns promptly if the individual:

- Develops pain or burning when passing urine.
- Has a new or significant increase in urinary frequency or urgency.
- Develops visible blood in their urine.
- Experiences new lower abdominal, back or side pain.
- Develops fever, shivering or feels unusually hot or cold.
- Has persistent nausea or vomiting.
- Passes significantly less urine than usual.
- Develops catheter leakage, blockage, reduced drainage or other catheter-related concerns.
- Becomes suddenly more confused, agitated or drowsy than usual.
- Experiences significant weakness or a reduction in mobility.
- Has substantially reduced food or fluid intake.
- Shows any other significant deterioration from their usual condition.

These symptoms can have different causes. Care staff should **report the observations rather than attempt to diagnose the cause**.

UTIs, Deterioration and Sepsis

An infection can sometimes become more serious and may contribute to **sepsis**, a life-threatening reaction to infection.

Care staff should be particularly alert when an individual appears significantly or rapidly more unwell than usual.

Possible warning signs of serious deterioration can include:

- New or severe confusion.
- Extreme drowsiness or difficulty waking.
- Rapid or difficult breathing.
- Mottled, unusually pale, blue or grey skin.
- Severe shivering or feeling extremely unwell.
- Very little or no urine output.
- Collapse or loss of consciousness.
- Rapid deterioration in the person's overall condition.

Follow the individual's care plan and organisational procedures for urgent escalation.

When to Call 999

Call **999** if the individual:

- Is severely struggling to breathe.
- Collapses, loses consciousness or is difficult to wake.
- Develops blue, grey, very pale or markedly mottled skin, lips or tongue alongside serious illness.
- Appears critically unwell or is deteriorating rapidly.
- Has symptoms that make you suspect **sepsis or another life-threatening medical emergency**.

If you believe someone's life is at immediate risk, **call 999 and follow emergency procedures**.

Accurate Recording and Reporting

When reporting a concern, useful information may include:

- What has changed from the person's usual condition.
- When the change was first noticed.
- Urinary symptoms the individual has reported.
- Relevant observations of urine where these form part of their care.
- Changes in fluid intake or urine output.
- Temperature or other observations when these are routinely monitored and staff are trained to undertake them.
- Changes in behaviour, alertness or mobility.
- Any catheter-related concerns.
- Medication or treatment already prescribed for the current problem.

Clear, factual information can help healthcare professionals assess the individual appropriately.

Good Practice Reminder

Do not assume that confusion means UTI — and do not assume that unusual-looking or strong-smelling urine confirms infection.

Look at the **whole person**, recognise changes from their usual condition, record what you observe and escalate concerns appropriately.

Early recognition of deterioration and prompt action are important parts of safe, person-centred care.

Summary

Urinary tract infections (**UTIs**) are common and can affect the bladder, urethra or kidneys. Symptoms vary between individuals and may include pain or burning when passing urine, increased frequency or urgency, lower abdominal discomfort, blood in the urine or feeling generally unwell.

Care staff play an important role in recognising **changes from an individual's usual condition**, supporting good hydration where appropriate, providing effective continence and catheter care, following infection prevention procedures and reporting concerns promptly.

It is particularly important not to assume that **confusion, cloudy urine or strong-smelling urine alone confirms a UTI**. Care staff should consider the whole person, record what they observe and ensure appropriate clinical assessment is sought when required.

UTI Awareness Checklist

✓ Know the individual's usual urinary pattern and general wellbeing where relevant.

✓ Recognise possible symptoms such as pain when passing urine, increased frequency or urgency.

✓ Support appropriate hydration according to the individual's care plan.

✓ **Never override a clinically prescribed fluid restriction.**

✓ Provide prompt, dignified and effective continence care.

✓ Follow good hand hygiene and infection prevention procedures.

✓ Follow catheter care arrangements when trained, competent and authorised.

✓ Observe for catheter blockage, leakage, reduced drainage or other concerns.

✓ Do not assume that cloudy or strong-smelling urine alone means the individual has a UTI.

✓ Do not assume that sudden confusion automatically means a UTI.

✓ Recognise sudden confusion as a potentially significant change requiring assessment.

✓ Support prescribed medication only when trained, competent and authorised.

✓ Record observations accurately and report significant changes promptly.

✓ Be alert to signs of deterioration and possible **sepsis**.

✓ **Call 999 if a life-threatening medical emergency is suspected.**

Further Information

For further guidance on urinary tract infections and related care, visit:

NHS – Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs)
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/urinary-tract-infections-utis/

NICE – Urinary Tract Infections
https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/conditions-and-diseases/infections/urinary-tract-infections

NHS – Sepsis
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sepsis/

UK Health Security Agency – Urinary Tract Infection Guidance
https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/urinary-tract-infection-diagnosis

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Related Knowledge Hub Resources

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- Resource 013 – Care Home Resident Hydration Monitoring Guide
- Resource 023 – Hand Hygiene Best Practice Checklist
- Resource 030 – Sepsis Awareness in Care Settings
- Resource 034 – Recognising Deterioration in Care Settings
- Resource 050 – Delirium Awareness
- Resource 051 – Continence Care Awareness
- Resource 052 – Catheter Care Awareness

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