

Basic Care: Changing Bed Linens

What is happening

As illness progresses, patients may spend most or all of their time in bed.

Clean, dry bedding is important for:

- Comfort
- Skin protection
- Infection prevention
- Dignity

Linens may need to be changed more often because of:

- Sweating
- Incontinence
- Blood or drainage
- Vomiting
- Food or medication spills

Before changing the linens

Explain what you are doing

- Tell the patient it is time to change the bedding
- Explain each step calmly and slowly
- Ask permission before repositioning when possible

Check the bed and surroundings

Before starting:

- Remove glasses, dentures, hearing aids, tissues, or other personal items from the bed
- Make sure tubing or medical equipment is not tangled in the sheets

Adjust the bed if possible

- Raise the bed to a comfortable working height
- Flatten the bed if tolerated and safe

If side rails are present:

- Use them for safety during repositioning

If no side rails are available:

- Two caregivers may be safer for changing linens

Gather clean supplies

Helpful supplies may include:

- Clean fitted sheet
- Flat sheet
- Pillowcase
- Towels or privacy blanket
- Draw sheet if used
- Gloves if linens are soiled

Have a clean area nearby for supplies.

Removing soiled linens

- Roll soiled linens inward to contain dirt or moisture
- Avoid shaking linens, which can spread germs into the air
- Place dirty linens directly into:
 - Laundry basket
 - Plastic bag
 - Hamper

Try not to place dirty linens on the floor.

Changing the fitted sheet

Reposition gently

- Roll the patient gently onto one side
- Keep the body aligned and supported

Replace the sheet

- Roll the dirty sheet inward toward the patient
- Place the clean sheet partially underneath the patient
- Roll the patient gently onto the clean side
- Move to the opposite side and complete the process

Keep linens smooth

Pull sheets tightly enough to reduce wrinkles.

Wrinkled bedding may:

- Increase discomfort
- Increase risk of skin breakdown

Draw sheets and repositioning

A draw sheet may help:

- Reposition the patient more safely
- Reduce pulling on the skin
- Make turning easier for caregivers

Draw sheets are especially helpful when two caregivers are assisting.

Changing top bedding and pillowcases

- Keep the patient covered with a privacy blanket when possible
- Remove blankets and sheets gradually
- Support the head and neck carefully when changing pillowcases

Replace bedding with clean, dry linens as needed.

After changing the linens

- Reposition the patient comfortably
- Adjust pillows and blankets
- Check that tubing and medical equipment remain secure
- Ask about comfort and temperature

Important caregiver reminders

Changing linens can be physically demanding.

Protect your own safety by:

- Avoiding heavy pulling or twisting

- Asking for help when needed
- Using draw sheets or repositioning devices if available

When to call hospice

- Repositioning becomes too difficult or unsafe
- Significant pain occurs during movement
- Skin redness or breakdown develops
- You need additional bedding or supplies
- You are unsure how to reposition safely
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