



## Personal Hygiene



Restricted Growth Association

Working to benefit people with restricted growth and their families.



# PERSONAL HYGIENE

This booklet is aimed at people with restricted growth and parents caring for children with restricted growth.

Personal hygiene can present a range of obstacles for people of restricted growth:

- Toilets and urinals may be too high to be used easily.
- Wash basins, too, may be hard to reach.
- Many taps on washbasins are positioned too far back, out of reach of someone with short arms.
- Toilet hygiene – people with short arms may have a problem with bottom-wiping.

6 *Personal hygiene is a problem when your arms are just not long enough to reach. Even your best friend does not understand unless they have the same proportions as you.* 9

Most of the obstacles can be overcome:

- by using stools or steps to get up to the toilet or sink
- in your own home, by fitting custom-made bathroom furniture
- by buying portable equipment.

This booklet looks at the solutions people with restricted growth have found to the obstacles presented by the different parts of the bathroom.

### Avoiding embarrassment

As in all areas of life, people with restricted growth find their own solutions to problems they come across, but in the area of personal hygiene taboos often make it harder to share ideas as freely as in other areas.

Talking about personal hygiene can be embarrassing – it's not something people like to discuss, or it tends to be the subject of jokes and sniggering. People also find it embarrassing to ask for help. This makes it all the more important to deal with any

problems as effectively – and discretely – as possible. Sorting out problems is an important way of ensuring your independence.



### Washing

When it comes to washing, a lot of problems with reaching can be overcome with loofahs or flannel pads fitted onto handles. With basins that are too high, steps or a stool provide one way up. Many people of short stature have basins fitted at a height that suits them.

6 *This is my house and things like sinks and basins are at our height. If an average-sized person comes, they have to adapt to use my facilities, just as I have to adapt if I go to visit them.* 9

It is possible to get special wall mountings for wash basins that let you adjust the height of the basin, raising and lowering it electrically as required. One such wall mounting is supplied by:

- Pressalit Ltd, Riverside Business Park, Dansk Way, Leeds Road, Ilkley, West Yorks LS29 8JZ. Tel: 01943 607651. Fax: 01943 6607214. As well as the basin wall mounting,

Pressalit produces a range of bathroom products that may be useful for people with problems of mobility.

Details of other suppliers are available from the Restricted Growth Association office.

If taps are set so far back on a sink or basin that they cannot easily be reached, they can usually be replaced by lever taps. A single lever tap with a long handle is ideal for people with very short reach or difficulties with gripping.

Other people devise novel solutions of their own...

❧ *To get into my bathroom you had to go down two steps. As the tread was too steep, I got someone in to make them into three shallower steps. When I told him the problem, he pondered for a while and then suggested raising the whole floor instead! So I had that done and now I can reach everything much more easily and it makes me feel so tall! ❧*

Some parents of short stature find they have problems with bathing their baby. Bending over a normal bath to hold the baby may be uncomfortable or put too great a strain on the back. Again, different people find different solutions. Some parents say the easiest approach is to get into the bath with their baby.

❧ *I bought a children's play table from a well-known Swedish furniture company. It is a good size, robust and a good height for me. I put a shallow baby bath on the table and fill it from the taps using the rubber tubes adapted from one of those hairwashing contraptions. Afterwards I can empty the bath straight into the shower tray. ❧*

### Toilet hygiene

For people with disproportionate short stature, not being able to reach to clean yourself is one of the most difficult and embarrassing problems you have to face. There is a range of solutions to this problem – some high-tech, some low-tech:

- sophisticated toilets with integral washing and drying facilities
- portable bidets
- bottom wipers designed to hold toilet paper which can be removed and disposed of
- home-made gadgets (for the DIY-minded) made of washing-up mop handles, coat hangers, etc.

The most sophisticated (and hence most expensive) toilets are those supplied as complete units with integral washing and drying facilities. These retail at just under £2000 (1998 prices). Suppliers who can provide and fit these include:

- Eastbourne Showers Ltd, Unit 23, Potts Marsh Industrial Estate, Eastbourne Road, Pevensey, East Sussex BN24 5NH. Tel: 01323 765875. Fax: 01323 460248 (supply the Geberit Shower Toilet 7000)
- Total hygiene, Hygiene House, 2 Newton Street, Stretford, Manchester M32 8LG. Tel: 0161 866 8080. Fax: 0161 866 8233 (supply the Clos-o-Mat).

Less expensive are bidet attachments that are fitted to your existing toilet bowls. Some just wash, while others wash and dry. Suppliers of these include:

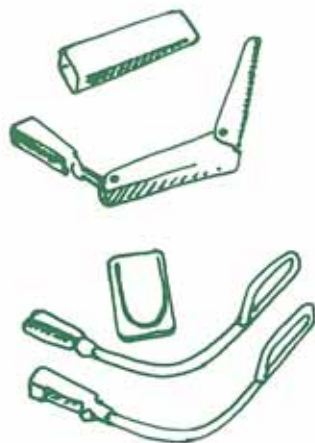
- Medic-Bath Ltd, PO Box 12, Ashfield Works, Briscoe Lane, Manchester M10 6XG. Tel: 0161 231 7495. Fax: 0161 223 4809 (supply the Medicloo Dryad, a special seat which fits onto an existing toilet bowl).
- The Capability Shop, phone 01246 261960 for details of nearest stockist (supply a portable, battery-powered bidet).

Other suppliers' details are available from the Restricted Growth Association office.

These are expensive solutions, compared to the much cheaper wipers, but it may be possible to get

a Disabled Facilities Grant to have one of these toilets installed. This is a means-tested grant and your application needs to be supported by an occupational therapist. It is a particularly appropriate item for people with back problems that are easily aggravated by twisting actions. (Note that VAT is not payable on items if they are for someone who is chronically sick or disabled. You will need to sign a declaration to this effect.)

Portable bottom-wipers are a much cheaper solution. The RGA supplies one designed by the Bath Institute of Medical Engineering (BIME) in consultation with RGA members. Made of metal, it is designed to hold toilet paper in place which can then be disposed of in the usual way. It folds up to fit into a handbag or pocket.



An alternative (but not really portable) model is available from Chester Care. Also designed by BIME, it has a moulded plastic head with serrations to grip the toilet paper and is mounted on a light curved handle. It can be hung on a wall mounted bracket.

- Chester Care/Homecraft Supplies, Sidings Road, Low Moor Estate, Kirby-in-Ashfield, Notts NG17 7JZ. Tel: 01623 754047 (supply both the fold-up and wall-mounted wipers, although the fold-up version is cheaper through RGA).

6 *For me one of the best solutions is good bowel management – learning to time it to when you have access to your own washing facilities. It's not always possible, but it avoids having to rely on unsuitable facilities.* ♪

### Helping children with personal hygiene

The bathroom presents many obstacles for the short-statured child, especially if the rest of the family is of average height. But with simple adaptations, children can learn to use all of the facilities by the same age as their average-height siblings or friends.

### Toilet training

With toddlers of restricted growth, the temptation for parents is to let them go on using a potty or training chair for much longer than an average-sized child. The toilet can and should be used shortly after potty training (around 2–3 years old) despite the practical difficulties. Continuing with potties has the danger of 'babying' the child and making the transition to toileting at school more difficult.

A major problem is to do with the way toilets are designed: reaching the toilet can be the hardest part for children of small stature. Steps or stools can be used to get up to the seat, but these have the drawback of being hazardous in wet conditions, i.e. there is always the risk of slipping or falling. The best stools are ones with a non-slip tread, e.g. moulded plastic or rubber, or you can buy sheets or rolls of suitable material in hardware stores to fix onto a stool. Products available from child care outlets have provided helpful solutions for some RGA members: the 'step-up toilet trainer' has an adjustable child's seat and handles that give the child something to hold on to as well as a step up. The Potty & Step Stool can initially be used as a potty, then the top can be detached to put onto the toilet and

the based used as steps up to the toilet or basin. Both are available from Tesco Direct and the potty and step stool from Mothercare.



*The step-up toilet trainer*

For all young children learning to use the toilet, there is the danger of falling through if the hole in the seat is too big. Children of average stature avoid this by holding onto the seat, but children with short arms cannot reach to balance. Fitting rails at the appropriate height is one answer to the problem.



*The Potty and Step Stool*

Another solution is to obtain a seat with a smaller hole which can be clipped on for the child to use. You can also get a 2-in-1 'Twolette' toilet seat – a standard-size seat with a flap in the lid that opens up to provide an infant-size hole.

Clothing presents another obstacle for children using the toilet. The key is to dress children in clothes that can be easily removed without an adult's help. This may mean Velcro instead of zips and buttons, loose elasticated waists, wide bottoms on trouser legs or easily removable shoes. For more ideas, see the RGA Lifestyles booklet entitled *What Shall I Wear?*

### **Bottom wiping**

During growth spurts children who were previously independent can find that they can't manage to clean themselves for a time. This can be a distressing problem for anyone at any age, but it can be especially hard for children who are also coming to terms with their height. It helps to remember, though, that with most types of disproportionate short stature children's arms will grow proportionately longer as they get



*Twolette toilet stool*

older and (in most cases) they will eventually be able to reach sufficiently to clean themselves.

While children cannot manage, parents have to help with personal hygiene, as well as helping their child learn how to use any gadgets and aids that will make them independent. Even with children who cannot yet reach back far enough to wipe themselves you should encourage them to continue trying to stretch and use their muscles, or they may never be able to do it.

❧ *I found it hard not to give in when my daughter kept whining that she couldn't do it, when we both knew she could. It might have been easier – for us both – if I had kept helping her but I felt if I didn't force her to do her own toileting, instead of asking me to do it for her, then she would end up being very dependent and that would really hold her back at school or whenever I'm not there. ♪*

Many parents find that a system of rewards – e.g. gold stars, little stickers or presents – can give their children real incentives to handle their own toileting and hygiene. It is not a good idea to use sweets as rewards – it's not only bad for their teeth and their weight, but may set

up a pattern whereby they come to demand sweets as rewards for other things, too.

For children learning to manage to wipe their bottom, it is essential to make sure there are as few environmental barriers as possible.

❧ *Once they're on the loo, the paper has to be within reach. We tried fixing up a new holder nearer the loo, but my son still found that difficult, having to twist and balance as he tried to tear off the paper. In the end we found it easiest to put a box of tissues next to the toilet on top of a small bin. He found it easy to pull out the individual tissues rather than unravelling miles of toilet paper! ♪*

Some parents find that children can do a better and quicker job with moist toilet tissue rather than dry paper. Many adults of short stature prefer this too.

### **Avoiding infections**

Some mothers mention the problem of their short-statured daughters getting recurrent bouts of cystitis. The problem may be partly caused by wiping from back to front, so that bacteria from faeces come into contact with the vaginal area and lead to infection. Mothers may need to advise



children about taking special care with cleaning and learning to wipe from behind, perhaps with the aid of a bottom wiper device. If your child does get cystitis, it should be treated immediately by consulting a doctor.

### **The wash basin**

Reaching the wash basin is another challenge faced by young, short-statured children. Older children can just use a standard sized stool and most can reach the tap. For younger children (ages 2-6), it is more difficult. You may need to scour hardware stores for a suitable stool or steps, or custom-make one yourself. Whatever kind of stool you choose or make yourself, be sure there is non-skid material on the steps as well as on the floor below the basin.

If the toothbrush holder and soap holder is out of your child's reach, you can put their toothbrushes in a cup or holder near the edge of the counter. Next to this keep a toothpaste pump and a soft-soap pump. Pumps are easiest because short little fingers make it hard to squeeze large tubes of toothpaste or handle a large bar of soap. Find a pump that has a large base to press upon, so that the palm of the

hand may be used. Some toothpaste pumps have a small button on the top which must be pressed by a finger and may need more pressure than a small child can apply.

6 *I bought one of those trays on a rotating base that you see in hardware catalogues. I put all the kids' toiletries on that on the unit next to the sink. They can just turn the tray round and pick up the item they want without having to reach and knocking things over. ♪*

Small hotel-size soap bars are ideal for children's small hands and fingers. These can be purchased from some supermarkets. Finding a place to hang a washcloth reachable from the stool will also help children learn to wash their own face.

One last item to help children with washing and teeth-brushing is to place a mirror down low, where they can see their face as they brush their teeth or wash. This can be as simple as a make-up mirror, or a mirror that extends out from an accordion arm attached to the wall (it folds out of the way when not in use). Early use of mirrors should be encouraged not only for personal hygiene and good

appearances, but also for building self-esteem.

6 *In our house the top of an extra-long mirror is at standard height so we can all see ourselves in it.* 9

### Access to the bathroom

Being able to turn on the bathroom light switch and close and open the door are crucial to helping children to use the sink or toilet unaided. Light switch adapters can be bought in most toy or baby stores or a longer string can be attached to the pull switch. You may also be able to get door knob extenders. Another solution for reaching the door knob or light switch is to keep a small stool just inside the door.

### The bath

Falls in and out of the bath are common and dangerous for people of short stature. Almost any type of stool (with non-skid top) can be used to get into the tub if needed. For those who want to find a more permanent solution there are low-profile baths available, with a very low side.

For average-sized baths, you may be able to buy a device that fits over the side of the bath and has steps on both sides for climbing in and out (available through medical supply stores). Handles to help you climb over the tub side can be placed almost anywhere. These can be bought from hardware stores or medical supply stores.

Non-slip material or a mat can be placed in the bath to avoid falls. Some people also keep a rubber mat draped over the side lip of the bath. The rubber suction cups hold it in place and makes the side of the tub less slippery when climbing in. You may also want to put a child-safety sponge cover on your bath taps, to prevent painful bumps on the head.

### Personal hygiene at school

There may be particular problems for short-statured children at school, if all the school's toilet facilities are designed for adults or children of average stature. Parents should discuss their children's needs with the school and help to find sensitive ways of dealing with them. This may mean having an attendant to help with cleaning if your child cannot cope alone. You may be able to persuade the school

to make adaptations to one of the toilets, e.g. fitting rails or a smaller toilet, putting a lower handle on the door, altering the position of the toilet roll holder.

Visiting the school before the child's first day will be essential. If you take your child in with you, he or she can test out the facilities. You can then work out what needs to be done. If all that is needed is the right-sized stool, that can be put in place before term starts. Then the child can be sure of being able to use the facilities without being embarrassed. See the **Lifestyles** booklet *Going to School* for more advice on liaising with the school.

6 *My girls needed to sit on the floor in order to take off their knickers, because they can't balance well on one foot. Since the floor can get pretty dirty, I taught them to sit on the stool instead. No one else used that stool, so it was usually much cleaner than the floor. Another thought is to sit on a paper towel if the floor is not too wet.* 9

### Menstruation management

Most women of restricted growth deal with menstruation in the same way as women of normal stature. Although many women may find

the application of tampons difficult or impossible, there are some who use this method. There is a variety of press-on towels readily available with disposable sachets.

### Other sources of help

RADAR (the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation), 12 City Forum, 250 City Road, London EC1V 8AF, tel: 0171 250 3222. RADAR publishes a range of books and leaflets, including their Health and Social Services Factsheet No 2: 'How to get help from Social Services'. This may be useful if you are looking for help with fitting suitable bathroom facilities.

RADAR also operates the National Key Scheme, offering independent access for disabled people to around 4000 locked public toilets around the country. RADAR will supply a key for £2.50 with a declaration of disability – 'I am a disabled person and I wish to buy a National Key Scheme key'. Without such a declaration, VAT has to be charged, making the price £2.94. (Check with RADAR for current price and for availability of the guide to the toilets fitted with the NKS lock.)

This booklet was written by Hugh Hillyard-Parker, with the help of the many members and their families who have contributed their experiences towards it. Their contributions were compiled by RGA Information Officer, Ros Smith.

RGA would like to acknowledge the grants from the Department of Health and the National Lottery Charities Board which have made it possible to produce this booklet. The Wellcome Trust Medical Photographic Library has supplied many of the photographs.

The RGA encourages members to share information and sources of help.

### Other RGA publications

#### What is...?

The **What is...?** series looks at particular restricted growth conditions or issues. The titles in this series are:

Achondroplasia

Hypochondroplasia

Pseudoachondroplasia

SED

Diastrophic dysplasia

Rarer syndromes

#### Lifestyles

The **Lifestyles** series focuses on particular aspects of living with a restricted growth condition. The other titles in this series are:

Babies and the Early Years

Going to School

The Teenage Years

Careers, Employment and Education

Having a Baby

Adoption

The Later Years

Driving a Car

Bikes, Trikes and Ride-on Toys

Sporting Opportunities

What Shall I Wear?

Limb Surgery



Produced by  
Communication Resources  
Limited

for  
**Restricted Growth Association**  
PO Box 8, Countesthorpe  
Leicestershire LE8 5ZS  
Tel: 0116 2478913