

Do We Have to Live with Incontinence?

At Rehab Professionals of Cleveland, we believe that women today face an increasing number of issues that require special care. Rehab Professionals has a Women's Health program for treating conditions unique to women such as pregnancy related back pain, incontinence, pelvic pain, scarring, vulvar pain, fibromyalgia and osteoporosis.

What exactly is incontinence?

Incontinence is an involuntary loss of urine that may occur in several ways. Stress incontinence occurs during a laugh, sneeze, cough or physical exertion. Urge incontinence occurs when a woman cannot get to the bathroom quickly enough to avoid an accident. Mixed incontinence is a combination of the two. Another related bladder problem is called urge, which describes a sudden, strong need to urinate. Although urge may occur with or without incontinence, trips to the bathroom will increase in frequency.

What do women do about this?

Except in cases that occur after childbirth, often these problems come on so slowly, that women accommodate by reducing their fluid intake, wearing pads, avoiding situations where they are uncertain about the proximity of a ladies room, or just convincing themselves that symptoms are "a normal part of aging"

What causes incontinence problems and how prevalent are they?

Problems of incontinence are very prevalent and sales of absorbent products for adults are becoming a booming business. The causes of incontinence are varied. Childbirth is one of them. Even women who have had C-sections have had the prolonged pressure of the uterus on the pelvic floor. A recent estimate is that 1/3 of women with normal vaginal deliveries suffers from incontinence.

So, is incontinence really caused by childbirth?

Some incontinence is. Certainly pregnancy and delivery have a big impact on the pelvic floor. However, many women who have never had children also suffer from incontinence. So there are other issues also involved here.

What else causes incontinence?

One issue is core muscle weakness, which occurs over time if proper exercise is not ongoing. This includes the pelvic floor but also the low back, hips and the abdominal muscles.

What else besides muscle weakness is a problem?

There's also the problem of pelvic organ prolapse. After the age of about 40, the pelvic organs, including the bladder, uterus, and bowel slowly "head south." The bladder tends to lean down and back toward the front wall of the uterus and the vagina. As this happens, the distance between the stored urine in the bladder and the opening of the urethra is lessened. The result is that any amount of downward pressure from a cough or sneeze can easily lead to urine loss.

Do women need to have surgery to correct this problem?

Many women have surgical bladder lifts and this certainly is an option. Women need to know, however, that they have another choice, which is the "Beyond Kegels" program. These are combination exercises that are completed in a variety of positions and can help restore the normal alignment of the organs. I've actually worked with a number of women who have returned to their doctors while in therapy. Their doctors said they had never before seen a prolapse corrected without surgery. Those were very gratifying moments for these women and for me.

What is urge incontinence? Is that a weakness problem too?

Many women, who strengthen their hips, lower abdominal and pelvic area muscles notice that their urge problems diminish; however, urge is actually caused by the nervous system, not the muscular system.

Is that why you see ads on TV for medication for "overactive bladder"?

Yes, many women with irritable bladder take medication to quiet the feelings of "urge" to decrease the frequency of trips to the bathroom; however; there is a more conservative, non-chemical approach available. The involuntary or autonomic portion of the nervous system controls the filling and emptying of the bladder. When this autonomic system gets out of balance, and it gets unbalanced for a variety of reasons, the bladder can become "overactive" and send frequent messages that emptying is urgent. So we need intervention for the nervous system.

So you can change this without medication?

Absolutely! With careful instructions women are taught the necessary combination of exercise, self management, and lifestyle changes needed to bring the nervous system back into balance and bring the bladder back into its normal fill and empty cycle.

Any other advice about this problem?

Of vital importance is that woman learn what their options are so that they can make the best choice for themselves and their own particular situation.

Rehab Professionals of Cleveland provides a welcoming, supportive and compassionate environment for our patients where the therapeutic relationship enhances the opportunity for change. Because physical therapy is non-invasive, it needs to be recommended before surgery. Often fewer than six physical therapy sessions can result in a significant decrease in symptoms. In the state of Ohio, consumers are no longer required to obtain a physician referral prior to seeing physical therapist. Women can see Stephanie Pritts, PT in Lakewood or Jennifer Blakeney, PT, MPH in Broadview Heights or our Downtown location. Contact Rehab Professionals of Cleveland for more information at 216-221-2525 or 440-526-8566.