Understanding Female Stress Incontinence

What is stress incontinence?

Millions of women experience involuntary loss or leakage of urine, called urinary incontinence. Instead of seeking professional help, many women mistakenly assume incontinence is an inevitable part of aging, which it is not. Although urinary incontinence can be embarrassing and bothersome, successful treatment options are available.

If you are like many women, you may be reluctant to talk about some gynecologic issues, like bladder control, even with your doctor. Women with incontinence sometimes restrict activities and avoid social situations for fear of humiliation. The good news is with an accurate diagnosis, bladder control issues can be treated, managed and often eliminated.

There are two main types of urinary incontinence, stress incontinence and urge incontinence. Sometimes both occur together and are called mixed incontinence. With stress incontinence, women may find that their urinary leakage occurs when they:

- Move in a way as to put pressure on the bladder
- Cough, laugh, sneeze, exercise, lift or bend over

Diagnosing incontinence

The first step to relief is to talk with your doctor or health care practitioner if you find you are experiencing leakage. You may be referred to a urologist or a urogynecologist, a specialist who focuses on urinary and pelvic disorders in women. Your practitioner will recommend and perform urodynamics, a special type of bladder testing, that can help to properly diagnose incontinence and help to select the best treatment option for you.

Treatment options

Conservative remedies

Exercises to strengthen the pelvic muscles can be helpful treatment for symptoms of urinary leakage. Your health care practitioner can show you how to do Kegel exercises using the pelvic floor muscles. However, many women are not able to do the exercises properly and may benefit from pelvic muscle therapy. This is very similar to physical therapy for other conditions. Once a woman learns to do this properly, she can do the exercises at home on her own.

Vaginal devices

A device called a “pessary” can be placed in the vagina to press against the vaginal wall and nearby urethra. This pressure helps reposition the urethra, leading to less leakage. Your health care practitioner will fit you with the right type of pessary and show you how to take care of it. It is important have regular visits to ensure proper positioning and to watch for vaginal or urinary tract infections.

Some women who only leak with specific conditions such as running, can insert a little soft “plug” into the urethra, which prevents leakage during the time it is in place.

Injections

Substances like collagen can be injected into the tissues around the bladder or urethra to make them thicker, which reduces stress incontinence. Injections are done under local anesthesia so you do not feel them. Injections may need to be repeated over time.

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Surgery
In some women with stress incontinence, the urethra and bladder may have lost the normal support. Different techniques for correcting this have been developed, however, the technique most often used now is a “sling” or tension-free vaginal tape procedure. A small strip of biologic or synthetic material is placed for support under the urethra through a vaginal incision.

If there are no symptoms indicating “falling” of the bladder or other prolapse of the vagina that require repair, then a “sling” procedure can be done under local anesthetic with sedation as an outpatient procedure. Most patients are able to go home several hours later without a catheter.

Many women suffer in silence and resort to wearing pads or even adult diapers which can be associated with skin irritation and sores. Urinary leakage can interfere with enjoyment of life and lead to diminished self-esteem and depression.

Remember:
• Stress incontinence is common in women.
• Stress incontinence is treatable at all ages.

Need more information?
Norton Women’s Care offers these treatment options to get you back to enjoying life. Talk with your primary care physician or OB/GYN about your symptoms. To find a physician or for more information, call (502) 629-1234 or visit NortonWomensCare.com.

Missy Ulfe, R.N., assists women who need help navigating the health care system. Her office is in Marshall Women’s Health & Education Center. For more information, call (502) 899-6310 or email melissa.ulfe@nortonhealthcare.org.

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