

GOING AND GOING?

Take Control of Incontinence Before it Takes Control of You

Tired of those over-the-hill birthday parties where the guests bring those awful gag gifts, which almost always include - among other tacky things - Depends? Maybe it would be funny if you weren't, uh, dependent upon them, but if you or someone you care about is having a problem with incontinence, a "gag" gift, an advertisement or any public reminder of this very real and embarrassing problem is far from funny.

Don't wait until incontinence takes over your life, keeping you from doing the things you enjoy. Get help fast. "Quality of life is important, says Douglas VanDrie of Grand Rapids Women's Health. "Talk to a professional who can help you get your life back."

"It's a silent problem," said urogynecologist Kimberly Kenton of Loyola University Medical Center, co-author of the first national study to document the serious extent of the damage.

There are three types of urinary incontinence, according to Seena Davies, M.D. of Advantage Health Physician Network, Grand Rapids. They are:

- 1 **Overflow incontinence** - caused by inability of the bladder to contract properly, resulting in incomplete emptying of the bladder and frequent urinary leakage;
- 2 **Stress incontinence** - occurring when an individual involuntarily loses urine after pressure is placed on the abdomen (i.e. sneezing, coughing, laughing, etc). Physical changes resulting from pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause are often the causes.
- 3 **Urge incontinence** - which happens when an individual feels a sudden need to urinate, and cannot control the urge to do so. It is often found in people who have conditions such as diabetes, stroke, and dementia.

Many professionals suggest that by strengthening your pelvic floor, you can help yourself get matters under control.

The underappreciated pelvic floor muscles keep us continent; support the organs, including the bladder; and are essential for a healthy back, tummy and sexuality, said Missy Lavender, executive director and founder of the Women's Health Foundation.

"Pelvic health needs to be as important as breast and back health," said Lavender, who suffered bladder control problems after childbirth.

While the chance of having a pelvic floor disorder increases with age and the number of times a woman has given birth, the problem also plagues young female athletes and those who have never delivered a child. Even speedskater Bonnie Blair, one of the most decorated female athletes in Olympic history, struggled with incontinence after the birth of her son.

"I'd get half a block (on a run) and my shorts would be soaked," Blair recently confessed to more than 300 women at "The Sisterhood Health Forum" in Chicago, a national initiative designed to raise awareness about pelvic health. "I'd walk, jog, piddle, piddle."

Dr. VanDrie believes that while the much-acclaimed Kegel (rhymes with bagel) exercises are considered one of the best ways to strengthen the pelvic muscles, in order to be effective, they must be done correctly. "In our office we spend time teaching the proper techniques. The physical therapy aspect is very important."

To find the elusive muscle you need to contract to perform a Kegel, lie on your back and squeeze the muscles around the vagina and anus - but not your butt or thigh muscles - as if you're trying to hold in urine and gas. Or stop the flow of urine in midstream and then start again. (Do not, however, make

a habit of holding your urine, as this could lead to urinary tract infections.)

Physical therapists suggest holding the contraction for 10 seconds. Shoot for 10 or 15 contractions at a time, doing five or six sets a day; whenever you wash your hands, feed or change the baby or sit through a red light.

Physical therapist Amy Stein, author of "Heal Pelvic Pain" (McGraw-Hill, \$16.95), says the root of pelvic problems is often misdiagnosed, so drugs or surgery are often prescribed when the symptoms could be improved using proper exercise and nutritional changes.

"By not seeing a physical therapist or not learning proper pelvic exercises after childbirth, a hysterectomy or pelvic surgery," she said, "women miss a perfect opportunity to heal, learn and possibly prevent future problems."



Taking It Back

Besides Kegels, there are lifestyle changes you can make to help yourself, says Dr. VanDrie. He recommends:

- 1 Avoiding pop, coffee and other caffeinated beverages, and switching to water and mild teas instead.
- 2 Not smoking.
- 3 Limiting intake of spicy and acidic foods.

Should medical intervention become indicated, one of the least invasive procedures, the "sling," is high on Dr. VanDrie's list of options.

"The new slings are phenomenal," VanDrie says. "Your recovery is short, over a weekend. You can go back to work on Monday."