

Is Your Bladder Preventing Intimacy?

By: Matthew E. Karlovsky, M.D.

Women's bodies are incredibly resilient, however many women notice changes to their bodies below the belt following major life events. Because women are living healthier and longer lives, the chances of having bladder problems and associated implications with activities in their life is expected to only become more bothersome over time.

Difficulties with bladder control are quite common in women of all ages, however, starting in the 30s and 40s, many notice that accidental urine loss becomes embarrassing and restricting. Despite being healthy or physical fit, the muscles and connective tissue supporting the bladder, vagina, uterus and rectum can become weak or stretched and make it known in a variety of ways.

Urinary incontinence (UI) is the involuntary loss of urine in any situation. It can be stress-induced, meaning, it occurs during exercise, running, jumping, laughing coughing and even sex. This is known as Stress Urinary Incontinence (SUI). Very often, the urge to go to the bathroom never subsides and you may feel like you must know where every bathroom is no matter where you go - or there will be trouble. The constant sense of urge, frequency and leaking before you can even pull your pants down is known as Overactive Bladder (OAB) and can coexist along with SUI in many women.

Giving birth is an exciting life-changing event, yet just one vaginal childbirth increases a woman's risk of bladder and other pelvic floor difficulties. Undergoing a C-section does not appear to be protective over time. The aging process, menopause, repetitive straining (chronic cough, constipation, or obesity) and surgery, such as a hysterectomy are other common predisposing factors. In fact, the lifetime risk for an American woman requiring surgery for issues related to pelvic floor weakness is 11 per cent. Urinary incontinence affects 13 million adults in the US, 85% of

them being women. Often women with urinary incontinence are reported to be depressed and/or embarrassed about their appearance and odor. Consequently, social interaction with friends and family, activities with the kids, and sexual activity is often avoided.

Sexual complaints are very common in women with pelvic floor weakness. Besides urine leakage with sex (which we'll explore further), a dropped bladder (cystocele) also impacts sexuality. Women with urine leakage, in general or during sex, have decreased libido, vaginal dryness and irritation, lack of sexual excitement and orgasm. Coital incontinence (urine leakage with sex), is noted to be a significant cause of sexual inactivity. Intuitively, a dropped bladder or uterus can cause pelvic pressure and pain with sex, leading to avoidance of intimacy. Coital Incontinence (CI) reportedly occurs in 10-24% of sexually active women with pelvic floor weakness yet is probably under-reported. CI can occur with a sexual partner or with masturbation. Women will rarely bring it up voluntarily - or even after direct questioning - with their family doctor.

There are two types of CI: urine leak with penetration and urine leak with orgasm. Urine leak with penetration is caused by a weak urethra or bladder sphincter, the same cause of urine leak with exercise or laughing. Urine leak with orgasm is seen in women with severe OAB symptoms. Urine loss from penetration is more common than with orgasm. Leakage can occur even if a woman tries to empty her bladder before becoming intimate. Diagnosing CI should be included in the evaluation of any female pelvic health issue, since many conditions coexist. An important question to be asked

is: Does treating CI or bladder drop help improve a woman's sexual experience? Many treatments for UI, whether it be from Stress Incontinence or OAB, are available in addition to repairing a dropped bladder or loose vagina. Treatment options range from conservative to minimally-invasive procedures. Often, pelvic floor muscle retraining, or Kegel exercises, can tone up a weak sphincter, help retrain an OAB, or tighten the vagina just enough to make sex more pleasurable. These exercises are easy to perform but must be continuously done. Some common OAB medications have been shown to help orgasm-induced urine leakage. Common side effects of these meds are dry mouth and constipation. Minimally-invasive surgery, such as slings, are placed in less than a ½ hour, have high success rates, low complication rates, and relatively short recovery times. These will often treat penetration-induced leakage. Bladder lift and vaginal tightening can be performed to help reduce dropped pelvic organs and reduce a wide vaginal opening.

Correcting urinary incontinence has been shown to greatly reduce CI, and as a result, women report improvement in all sexual domains: desire, arousal, lubrication, orgasm, satisfaction and elimination of pain. Resolving CI leads to greater self-confidence and greater sexual interest. Bladder lift leads to less vaginal bulge sensation and less pain with sex.

My goal in treating women with CI and other pelvic health problems is a comprehensive and tailored approach in addressing all potential concerns. The only thing holding you back is the courage to regain those life activities that may have been lost from embarrassment and avoidance. What are you waiting for?

Dr. Matthew Karlovsky is a urologist who is fellowship-trained and specializes in female pelvic health issues such as urinary incontinence, pelvic organ prolapse and recurrent urinary tract infections. He has appeared in M.D. News Magazine and on various television, radio and internet broadcasts. He has published numerous peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on pelvic floor repair, as well as articles in the lay press. He is a health writer for various websites including EmpowHer.com and Sun Times Online, and gives talks to physician and public groups on matters of female pelvic health. He practices in the Ahwatukee Foothills part of Phoenix. For more information or an appointment please visit: www.urodoc.net or his blog at www.femaleurology.blogspot.com.

