Urinary Incontinence Is Not “Normal” Part of Getting Older

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Urinary Incontinence is another of those health “closet” issues no one wants to discuss. Urinary incontinence is defined as the involuntary loss of urine. In other words urinating at the wrong time and in the wrong place, and not having the ability to keep it from happening. It is an embarrassing problem that women usually don’t want to discuss.

How common is UI? Urinary incontinence affects millions of men and women. Although women are affected at a rate 3 times higher than that of men, whether you are a man or a woman the older you get the more likely you will experience UI. Up to 50 percent of elderly people in the US have incontinence. UI is also one of the top three causes for admission to nursing homes. And, UI is not a low cost problem either. Including nursing home costs, total urinary incontinence-related costs in the United States are in the tens of billions of dollars!

Why should we worry about this problem? It is an inevitable part of getting older; so no need to complain about it. Right? Besides we have those “personal hygiene pads” that are made just for UI. (these things are not cheap either) Whether you or someone you know suffers from UI, the fact is UI is NOT a normal part of aging.

Unlike arthritis, wrinkles or hot flashes, UI is not a problem that is discussed around a luncheon or bridge table. Can you imagine this conversation “You know ladies, I have found that I now have a bit of a urinary problem and I was wondering if any of you have this too?”; “You’ll never believe what happened to me at the grocery store the other day….?” or “Which urinary pad do you prefer?”. All UI may be hard to talk about or embarrassing, but all UI is not the same.

There are different kinds of UI and treatments that work for one may not work for the other. The three types we will discuss are the types that are most common in women.

Stress Urinary Incontinence Stress incontinence is the type of UI that occurs when you perform activities such as jogging, lifting, coughing or sneezing.

Urge Incontinence This is the type of UI that happens when you hear water, put the key in the lock, or are trying to ignore going to the bathroom until you finish “one more thing”. Another component of urge incontinence is called overactive bladder or OAB. OAB sufferers feel like they have to go to the bathroom a lot. Even up to 3 to 4 times a
night. You know you have this if you have every location of every bathroom at the mall and on the way to the mall mapped out. OAB causes a decrease in quality of life and takes up a lot of time and energy. However, only 1/3 of OAB sufferers actually leak. So women rarely think this is a real issue. Nevertheless, it is an important problem to be aware of.

**Mixed Urinary Incontinence** That is, you have UI that is a mixture of both stress and urge types.

Different types of UI call for different treatments. Stress incontinence is typically caused by weak pelvic muscles or the fact that the uterus or bladder (or both) have “dropped”. Therefore mild stress incontinence can be helped by strengthening the pelvic muscles with the dreaded “Kegal exercises”, and yes you do have to perform these up to 30-50 times a day for up to 3 months before seeing results. If there is true “dropping” of pelvic organs or another anatomical problem contributing to stress incontinence the best option is a procedure of some type often surgery. However, urge incontinence and OAB can be treated with medications. If the problem is mixed incontinence sometimes both surgery and medication is needed. Other treatment options include biofeedback therapies and vaginal estrogen cream.

**Because urinary incontinence is such a closet issue, there are many options for treatment that go unrecognized because either patients are too embarrassed to tell the health care provider they leak or the health care provider just doesn’t ask.** The bottom line is that your health care provider can help you find the right solution, but you have to talk about the problem. It is worth it. Just think how much more time you would have if you didn’t need to rush to the bathroom all of the time, or your peace of mind if you didn’t have to worry about urinary leakage. You could actually drink something before leaving the house or not have to ration your liquids when you are out. So speak up. Remember – “you’re worth it and it’s all about you!”