

BLADDER

TIME TO FEEL BETTER: WHY YOU SHOULDN'T ACCEPT URINARY INCONTINENCE AS "NORMAL"

By Jenna Rehnstrom-Liberto

If you've ever joked with a woman at the gym about leakage while doing jumping jacks or giggled with your sister about not making it to the bathroom in time, you're likely experiencing the very common problem of incontinence. But, just because it's common, doesn't mean it's normal, says Dr. Mallory Hertz from FYZICAL Therapy & Balance Centers of Dakota Dunes.

"You hear that it's a normal part of aging, but it's not," says Dr. Hertz, a physical therapist specializing in the treatment of pelvic health issues. "I think that's why women live with it when they don't have to. There's definitely something we can do about it." While bladder health issues can affect anyone, most urinary incontinence issues affect women and most of those stem back to childbirth. Still, many women experiencing incontinence later in life might not make the connection, thus continuing the myth that bladder issues are a symptom of aging.

"Just because the incontinence can be linked back to childbirth doesn't mean these problems show themselves right away," warns Dr. Hertz. "The muscles in your pelvic area stretch to four times their normal length during a vaginal birth; that's greater than any other muscle in the human body. Those muscles are incredible, but you can see why they don't just 'bounce back.' They need to be encouraged in the right direction."



The reason many women don't experience problems right away? When we're young, other muscles compensate for the strength our pelvic muscles lose during pregnancy and childbirth, whether it be a vaginal birth or c-section. As we age, especially after menopause, the muscles taking on more than their share of the work slowly weaken, as well.

The good news is, whether you gave birth yesterday or decades ago – or if you're experiencing incontinence or bladder urgency for another reason – physical therapy can correct or improve the problem and help you feel better and more confident. As Women's Health Month, May is a great time to reach out to learn more and start a physical therapy program with FYZICAL.



Dr. Mallory Hertz shares that with new patients, she starts by getting to know their medical history and symptoms and then does a simple examination of the pelvic floor muscles.

"That gives me an idea of what their muscle structure is and where we need to go with their training. Most people come to me and have been doing no pelvic exercises. Most people have heard of Kegel exercises, but don't have a true pelvic floor routine or they're not doing it in great enough frequency to make a difference," says Dr. Hertz.

Another tool she uses is a bladder and bowel log, which guides patients to document when and what they eat and drink, how often they urinate and other bladder patterns. The log helps the team at FYZICAL see patterns that may be contributing to issues, like drinking too much caffeine or not enough water.



"Sometimes it's a behavioral issue we need to address," adds Dr. Hertz. "We want to make sure they have habits that are supportive to a healthy bladder, as well."

Habit changes are just one compliment to the exercise regimen Dr. Hertz practices with her patients to strengthen the muscles of the pelvic floor and ultimately teach those muscles to support the bladder and control leaks.

"We do different [pelvic] exercises to re-train those muscles," she says. "The stronger we can get those muscles, the more reactive they get." Doing your "homework," the established exercise routine, is key to success. For a simple stress incontinence issue, just three or four sessions of physical therapy might do the trick, while more complicated cases can take longer. Most exercises don't take any equipment, and all are based on the fundamentals of muscle control: connecting your brain to the muscle you want to move and repeating to get results.

Those results start with a conversation. Whether you're in the post-partum stage or post-menopause, Dr. Hertz encourages you to take the first step and talk about your bladder concerns.

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