



Female Incontinence

It can be an embarrassing subject and one that's hard to talk about. You may whisper to your friends about it but hesitate to bring it up to your doctor. However, female urinary incontinence after childbirth is way more common than you might think and not at all something to be ashamed of. It's something that happens as a result of childbirth, one of the most common life experiences of women. Let's break the taboo of female urinary incontinence and have an honest conversation about how to treat the condition.

We spoke with Dr. Marianne Wizda of **Washington Health System OB/GYN Care** to help us understand why urinary incontinence occurs after childbirth and what we can do about it. According to Dr. Wizda, about half of women experience some incontinence during pregnancy and ten percent of women go on to experience urinary incontinence after delivery.

An issue that some women experience as a result of childbirth is called stress incontinence. This means that sometimes urine will leak as a result of stress—like a sneeze, cough, heaving lifting, even laughing—because of the changes that occurred to her anatomy during pregnancy and childbirth. The main anatomical change is the loss of strength of the pelvic floor. During pregnancy, the weight of the baby puts pressure on the pelvic floor, weakening it. These muscles are responsible for helping you control your bladder as well.

Several factors may put some women at a higher risk for developing urinary incontinence. Women who give birth to larger babies, women who have had more babies and women who have spent more time pushing are more likely to have inflicted stress on their pelvic floor and increased their risk for incontinency.

There are steps women can take before and during their pregnancy to strengthen their pelvic floor muscles. Dr. Wizda recommends keeping weight gain under control, but also doing Kegel exercises, a technique for strengthening the pelvic floor. Kegels can be done before, during pregnancy and after delivery to maintain pelvic floor strength. She also notes that certain yoga poses that focus on pelvic strength have proven helpful in maintaining the integrity of the pelvic floor. Many pre- and post-natal yoga classes focus on strengthening these muscles.

If Kegels and other pelvic-floor strengthening exercises aren't enough to make a difference and treat the incontinence, physical therapy may be prescribed. Formal physical therapy will also focus on these same types of exercises but on a more rigorous and prescribed schedule. There are also support devices like pessaries and over the counter products that can be used. Finally, surgery may be used in women who are done having children and who have failed at other treatments. Dr. Wizda notes that weight loss and smoking cessation are vital for the long-term success of any treatment.

The most important step for getting treatment for urinary incontinence is to speak up and not be embarrassed. Ignoring incontinence is never a good idea, as this condition tends to get worse over time. The sooner it is treated, the better the outlook is for recovery. **So talk to your doctor today.**

Smiling new moms...



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