

Female Incontinence- An unfortunately well kept secret

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Millions of American women suffer silently with incontinence or leakage of urine. Because this condition causes embarrassment, social isolation and is too-often written off as a “normal part of aging”, the number of women who eventually present for treatment are only the “tip of the ice burg.”

There are two main categories of incontinence. Stress incontinence is leakage with coughing, laughing, sneezing or getting up from a chair. Any rise in abdominal pressure, in stress incontinence, will cause leakage of urine to some degree. Urge incontinence, on the other hand, is leakage without warning, on the way to the bathroom, or preceded by a strong urge to urinate and inability to make it to the bathroom on time. The cause of each kind of leakage is very different. The treatment of each kind is also very different.

For stress incontinence, the treatment is surgical. At this time there are no medicines to treat stress incontinence although some are under development. Surgical options include injection of collagen at the bladder opening or placement of a sling (synthetic material or the patient’s own fascia from the lower abdomen). Collagen injections are successful about 70% of the time but can take an average of 3 injections to get success. Sling surgery is successful in curing stress incontinence 95% of the time.

For urge incontinence the treatment is with medicine. There are now several medicines in the class that treats the bladder in cases of urgency, frequency, and urge incontinence. Detrol (tolterodine), Ditropan (oxybutnin), Vesicare (solifenacin), and Enablex (darifenacin) are all medicines that may help. There are several fluids that can make urge and urge incontinence worse: coffee, tea, soda, fruit juice, and alcohol. All of these should be used in moderation (1/day maximum) in people who suffer from urgency or urge incontinence.

If you or a woman you care about suffers silently from urinary leakage, encourage them to consult their physician about treatment options.