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Page: B01

Don't ignore overactive bladder woes

Q: Do you have any suggestions on how to have a conversation about incontinence? **A:** Even though it's a topic that many people veer away from -- even from their doctors -- it's one problem that more Americans need to face. Incontinence affects at least 25 million Americans. One out of four men over 65 years old faces some degree of incontinence, as do 40 percent of women in the same age range.

Ignoring an overactive bladder or staying silent can have severe consequences. It could be the result of an undiagnosed disease, an acute illness, a festering urinary tract infection or endocrine problems -- all of which could be addressed if your doctor only knew. According to the National Association on Continence, the average woman waits 6.5 years before seeing a doctor for her bladder control trouble and only one in eight Americans who struggle with the loss of bladder control have been diagnosed. Men are less likely to be diagnosed than women because they feel too embarrassed to discuss it with anyone.

Besides losing precious time for a diagnosis and treatment, there are emotional consequences that are costly, too. A common sign and consequence of incontinence is isolation. All too often, people affected with the condition stop going on trips, to the movies and on outings with their friends and family because they live in constant fear of having an accident. All day they are anxious of having an accident that will show leakage or cause an odor. Some quit their jobs because lifting, squatting, long meetings or not having continuous, easy access to a bathroom increases the risks of accidents. Sexual activity, especially for men, suffers as both partners worry about loss of bladder control.

The isolation, the constant state of fear and anxiety and being endlessly self-conscious cause a toll, and it often comes in the form of depression. Remaining silent just should not be an option.

Talking about it

1. Think of bladder health as just another health condition. Chances are you freely talk about your heart problems with your doctors and loved ones; your bladder deserves equal billing.
2. Gently explore the topic with a loved one by using an article (this one, for example) and share how you've learned that overactive bladder is not a normal part of aging and that it can be the sign of something else, so it makes sense to check it out.
3. Do not use the term "adult diapers;" instead refer to the absorbent pads as "disposable underwear," or "pull-ups." You may want to provide a few samples and leave them for "just in case" occasions. That way they don't have to gather the courage to buy them at the store.
4. Focus on how incontinence may be reversible, so all the more reason they should see their doctor.
5. Be honest, if you find the topic hard to start, say so: "Mom, it's not easy for me to bring this up because we both like to respect each other's privacy, but I'm worried that you may have a bladder problem and it's keeping you from enjoying your life. So, let's figure out what to do."
6. Humor may help. A recent survey by Caring.com reports that among 500 caregivers dealing with incontinence, 48 percent found that making light of it made it less embarrassing and awkward. This explains the latest string of advertisements for medications to curb overactive bladder featuring a cat holding herself, references to leaky pipes or one drug company's line, "The less you gotta go, the less you gotta worry."

It might be helpful if you have a basic understanding of incontinence, so here is the least you need to know about the three major types:

Stress Incontinence. The muscles of the pelvic floor, which have been dutifully supporting the bladder for all these years, become weakened -- mostly due to the wear and tear of childbirth. The bladder slips down without the muscle support and now the abdominal muscles can squeeze the bladder to leak out urine, such as when she coughs.

Overflow Incontinence. Urine in the bladder builds up to a point where the muscle that controls the flow (urinary sphincter) can't hold it. Urine leaks out throughout the day. Men who have an enlarged prostate are especially vulnerable as the prostate blocks the normal flow of urine, causing it to hold up in the bladder until it overflows.

Urge Incontinence. In this case, there's hardly any time between feeling the need to void and actually urinating. This might be caused by an infection or medications, which would make it reversible. If your mom has had a stroke, dementia or suffers from another neurological disorder, it can mean that the brain is no longer capable of sending "hold off" signals to the bladder. Two great resources for more information are: Simon Foundation for Continence, 800-237-4666 or www.simonfoundation.org, and the **National Association for Continence**, 800-252-3337 or www.nafc.org.

Get talking!

Section: Your Life

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