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Pelvic Support Problems

Expert advice on pelvic organ prolapse and pelvic floor disorders

By Trisha McBride Ferguson

Pelvic floor disorder can have an adverse effect on many aspects of a woman's life—from work and exercise to sexual activity. “Approximately one in three women will experience problems with pelvic floor dysfunction—including urinary leakage, vaginal or uterine prolapse, bowel leakage, emptying problems and urinary tract infections,” said James Theofrastous, MD, of Western Carolina Women's Specialty Center, an affiliate of Mission Health.

Common Causes

A woman's pelvic organs (vagina, cervix, uterus, bladder, urethra, small intestines and rectum) are held in place by the muscles of the pelvic floor. When these muscles and connective tissue become torn, stretched or weakened due to aging, patients can experience pelvic organ prolapse—a condition where the muscles can no longer support the pelvic organs.

“Pregnancy and childbirth are the greatest causes of pelvic floor problems; but many studies have shown that genetics can contribute by weakening the connective tissues that support the

Pelvic Prolapse Symptoms

The most common symptoms of pelvic organ prolapse are*:

- Pressure or fullness in the lower abdomen or pelvic area
- Sexual difficulties
- Urine leakage (urinary incontinence)
- Problems voiding the bowels
- Organs bulging out of the vagina
- Lower back pain
- Problems with inserting tampons or applicators
- Pelvic pressure that worsens when standing, lifting or coughing

**According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists*

To schedule an appointment with a board-certified and fellowship trained specialist in Pelvic Medicine and Reconstructive Pelvic Surgeries, call Western Carolina Women's Specialty Center at (828) 670-5665.

Keep On Kegeling

You've likely heard of these internal exercises before, but you may not know that they can help you improve your pelvic floor. Doing these exercises regularly can help strengthen the muscles that surround the openings of the urethra, vagina and rectum, and can also help improve incontinence.

How to Kegel

- Squeeze the muscles that you use to stop the flow of urine.
- Hold for 10 seconds, then release.
- Repeat up to 50 times a day.
- Make the exercises a part of your routine for four to six weeks.

pelvic organs," said Dr. Theofrastous. "All of these problems usually worsen slowly with time."

While many women have no adverse reaction to pelvic organ prolapse, others experience debilitating symptoms. "Prolapse can cause pelvic pressure, low back pain, trouble emptying the bladder or bowels, and reduced comfort or sensation with sex," explains Dr. Theofrastous. "As the prolapse progresses, a woman may notice a bulge at the vaginal opening, and eventually the bulge may protrude outside. When the tissues are outside, they often become abraded from rubbing and can develop bleeding ulcerations."

Treatment Options

There are a variety of options available to help treat and manage these pelvic floor issues. A simple, gentle pelvic exam will determine whether prolapse is affecting the bladder, uterus or upper vagina, small bowel or rectum.

"Treatment of prolapse depends on the severity of a woman's symptoms, how advanced the prolapse is, and the woman's age,

health and activity level," said Dr. Theofrastous. Alternatives include lifestyle changes, bladder training and surgery. Surgical options range from simple outpatient vaginal procedures to advanced laparoscopic reconstructive surgery. Older and less healthy women may choose to avoid surgery by using a simple device called a pessary, which is fitted by a healthcare provider and can then be inserted into the vagina to support the pelvic organs. ■



James Theofrastous, MD, is a Clinical Professor at UNC-Chapel Hill School of Medicine. Dr. Theofrastous, and his partner Nancy Howden, MD, are the region's only fellowship-trained, board-certified Female Pelvic Medicine and Reconstructive Pelvic Surgeons. Western Carolina Women's Specialty Center is an affiliate of Mission Health. (828) 670-5665.