

BLADDER WOES

“It is not normal to leak any urine at all – not even a little bit!”
declares physiotherapist Monica Donaldson.

by Verne Maree,
photograph by
Bud Hayman

One of our biggest problems, says Monica, is misinformation passed on by our mothers and other older women, who reassure us that not being able to control one's bladder is usual after having a baby. The other problem is the taboo surrounding incontinence; it's painfully embarrassing, it's horrible, it's smelly, it's something that happens to old people.

“There's this misperception that leakage is just part of ageing,” concurs fellow-physiotherapist Danielle Barratt. “That's not true – we should be fully continent all the time. But studies have shown that it takes the average woman five to seven years to even mention it.”

Dr Kim Hayes, the founder of Body with Soul, explains that one of the main causes of incontinence is weakness of the pelvic floor muscles (PFMs).

“As a GP, I do a *lot* of Pap smears. About 50 percent of the women I examine have an issue with this area – I can see it immediately I look at the pelvis – but when I ask them if they ever leak urine, most of them say no. Then they might admit, ‘Well *actually*, it does happen sometimes when I sneeze, laugh or cough...’. Until it really starts to affect their quality of life, they generally will not admit to it.”

Two Main Types of Incontinence

- **Stress Incontinence** – involuntary leaking due to pressure on the abdomen caused by laughing, coughing, sneezing or exercising
- **Urge Incontinence** – involuntary bladder contractions cause the sudden, uncontrollable urge to urinate

The four of us are sipping lattes and camomile tea in the shady outdoor area of the café at Body with Soul, in the midst of tranquil Rochester Park. I'm about to find out how physiotherapy can help overcome incontinence, including – but not limited to – the practising of Kegel exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles (PFMs).

It is important to have the reasons for your incontinence diagnosed correctly, says Monica. If your PFMs are good and strong, it may be that you have what is known as an overactive bladder, which may respond to medication. But if weak, stretched PFMs are the problem, no medication will help. You can be helped by a combination of bladder training and pelvic floor exercises.

“Bladder training?” I wonder aloud, picturing a singing, dancing cartoon character. This, she explains, involves teaching good toileting habits and can include Kegel exercises, and lengthening intervals between urination to increase the capacity of the bladder.

Pelvic floor exercises can also help prevent the bladder, the uterus or the rectum prolapsing. This happens when one of these organs drops down out of its normal position, creating a bulge.

As the pelvic floor is part of the cylinder of muscles that contribute to core strength – PFMs at the bottom, the diaphragm at the top – it helps to keep your back strong and healthy, too.

Kegel Exercises

Named for Dr Arnold Kegel, who came up with the idea in the 1940s, these exercises involve contracting and relaxing the PFMs in order to strengthen them – both during pregnancy, to prepare for the stresses of vaginal childbirth, and throughout your life.

Do You Need Them?

To see your PFMs in action, you can squat over a mirror and try a few Kegel-like contractions. Look at the perineum – that narrow area between the anus and the vagina. It should visibly lift with each contraction. This is the exact opposite of what happens when you bear down, for example in a bowel motion or in childbirth.

Danielle also suggests the “stop test”, where you try to stop in the middle of urinating. You should be able to stop the flow; or at least reduce its strength. “But don’t use this as an exercise,” she cautions.

How and When?

Like other muscles in the body, the PFMs contain both slow-twitch muscle fibres (for endurance, as in a marathon) and fast-twitch fibres (for speedy response, as in a 50-metre dash), so you need to do two types of contraction. The first is slow and sustained, for say 10 seconds at a time; the second is done as quickly as possible and instantly released.

“If you can repeat a deep, 10-second contraction 10 times, you’re doing well,” Monica reckons. “After that, do as many quick, strong contractions as you can, and stop when they no longer feel defined and effective. Don’t overdo it: do only as many as you can manage comfortably; start gradually and build it up.

“It can take up to three months to see results. Do them every day; at least once, but as often as possible. The good thing is that you can do them anywhere: at the bus stop, in the car, at your desk or wherever.”

Hmm, I think to myself. Contracting your naughty bits has a way of turning you on. So it may be wise to avoid doing this over-zealously in the boardroom, for example, or during a parent-teacher interview. You don’t want your eyes to start glazing over and distracting thoughts of Hugh Jackman to affect your concentration, now, do you?

Factors that Stretch Your PFMs

- pregnancy and childbirth
- ageing and menopause
- being overweight
- chronic constipation
- chronic coughing, e.g. a smoker
- lifting heavy weights
- abdominal surgery, e.g. a hysterectomy, which may damage nerves

I ask Kim why ageing and related menopause affect the integrity of both the PFMs and the vagina. She explains that these tissues are full of hormone receptors. Low levels of progesterone and the oestrogens can make them weaker and more fragile; hormone balancing with bio-identical hormone therapy can be of great help here, too.

Body with Soul

Monica and Danielle joined Body with Soul in November last year. Their post-graduate specialty in women’s health covers, in particular: pelvic floor dysfunctions, musculoskeletal dysfunctions, general exercise programmes, breast problems and ergonomics.

The Body with Soul concept is a holistic one that has brought together a wide range of top-notch medical and related care providers who work as a synergistic network. Ranging from family health practitioners such as Dr Kim Hayes herself to experts in psychology, nutrition, well-baby practice, osteopathy, physiotherapy, speech therapy, podiatry, allergy and sleep disorders – the most recent addition is an art therapist! – its professionals can and do cross-refer on many levels. As Monica points out, at Body and Soul you will receive a degree of continuity of care that is extremely hard to come by. 📖



Body with Soul is at 45 Rochester Park. Call the Family Medical Clinic at 6776 2288; allied healthcare providers at 6779 0660. www.bodywithsoul.com

Useful Links:
www.bladderbowel.gov.au
www.acpwh.org.uk