

## Stress Incontinence: If You Don't Ask, They Won't Tell

by Barbara Rinehart

Stress incontinence is embarrassing, demeaning and restricting. Less than 40% of women with urinary stress incontinence (USI) talk about it with their physicians. Even fewer physicians ask their patients about USI, according to Donnica Moore, M.D., vice president of the American Medical Women's Association (AMWA) (AMWA, 1998).

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention find that only about one-third of physicians routinely ask their patients about bladder control. Urologists are more likely to ask (89%) compared to gynecologists (58%) or primary care physicians (23%). AMWA has begun a public awareness campaign called "Life Without Limits" to destigmatize USI and empower women into taking control of their lives.

### Consider the Statistics

More than 10 million American women suffer from incontinence, and 6.5 million of these women suffer from USI. Worldwide, urinary incontinence affects in excess of 26 million individuals. Direct and indirect costs are estimated at over \$27.8 billion each year, including \$4.2 billion for informal home care. About one in 10 individuals over the age of 65 deals with USI daily. It costs them approximately \$3,941 each year (UAB, 1998).

USI may occur at any age. In fact, more than 3 million women develop USI before the age of 35, and 50% of young, nonparous women have the condition (Nemir and Middleton, 1954; Wolin, 1969). USI primarily affects women, but one in five men will also suffer from this condition. Most women live with the signs and symptoms for 10 years before they seek help.

### Mechanism of Action

USI has many contributory factors—childbearing, dips in estrogen levels, damaged pudendal nerves, shifts in organs, stroke, infections, impaired mobility or medication use. Continence relies on support of the bladder neck and urethra from the interconnection of three structures: 1) the arcus tendineus fasciae pelvis, 2) the levator ani muscles and 3) the endopelvic fascia around the urethra and vagina.

Bladder function involves smooth and striated muscle systems and a combination of nervous system components located in the brain, along the spinal cord, in the bladder and in the urethra. Urinary continence is maintained as long as the intra-urethral pressure remains higher than the intravesical pressure (pressure within the bladder cavity). Anything affecting these mechanisms can cause urine leakage.

"Physicians can play a major proactive role in helping to eliminate the barriers to incontinence diagnosis and treatment," said Kathryn L. Burgio, Ph.D., director of the Continence Program at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. "By eliminating barriers, patients will seek help early; then appropriate, often noninvasive, treatment can be offered."

### Barriers to Treatment

A summary of the medical literature identifies five major barriers to the diagnosis and treatment of USI. The first barrier is denial of the problem. Women who are not asked about incontinence probably will not admit to having a problem. Physicians are often as reluctant as their patients to talk about this problem. The embarrassment can be so powerful that women turn to buying pads or diapers before they ever speak about it (Heap, 1987).

The second barrier to seeking help is that discussing loss of bladder control is unacceptable. There is a societal taboo against discussing this, even with a physician. Early identification and treatment of USI can avert significant social and financial consequences, so it is important to work toward eliminating this barrier.

The third barrier is the patient's overwhelming emotional reaction to this problem. Some patients may be reluctant to speak up about bladder control because they believe it cannot be cured or improved, when in fact 80% of all USI can be cured or significantly improved. Sufferers may believe that it is a moral weakness or a natural part of aging rather than a medical issue.

The fourth barrier is physician/patient communication. Bedside manner is extremely important when dealing with the topic of