Community Matters
North Valley Hospital - Bladder Health
By Kasa Zipfel

It's often the smallest things in life that we take for granted, such as the ability to cough, laugh or sneeze without experiencing urinary leakage. Many women, however, become apprehensive to attend their favorite fitness or social activities because the simple act of jumping or laughing might cause an unpleasant incident. Bladder health is an issue that most young women don't think about. Yet, most older women are confronted occasionally with this problem, and for someone it is debilitating, embarrassing, and inconvenient. Suddenly, an outing must be planned and close to bathrooms. In the event of urinary incontinence, you have to carry a spare pad and change of clothes. “Probably every woman, at one time in her life, will experience a moment of incontinence,” explained Dr. Randall Beach, OB/GYN at Alpine Women’s Center in Whitefish.

Dr. Beach explained that incontinence manifests typically in two ways, as either stress or urge incontinence. Stress incontinence is the most common type and can be due to weak pelvic floor muscles, a change in the bladder's position or a weakening in the wall between the urethra, bladder and vagina. “This happens more often with women who have had children and worsens as women age. Fifty percent of women have stress incontinence by the time they are 65,” explained Dr. Beach. “Typically as women deliver babies, damage is done to the pelvic floor, which results in an increased risk of stress incontinence. For every vaginal delivery a woman has, the likelihood of stress incontinence increases approximately 10 percent.”

The risk of stress incontinence also directly correlates to increased pressure on the bladder, often caused by uterine enlargement and being overweight. One of the most beneficial things to combat stress incontinence, in addition to maintaining a healthy weight, entails working out your pelvic floor muscles. “A lot of people will exercise, do pilates, yoga and workout their abs, but they don't engage the muscles of their pelvic floor,” Dr. Beach explained. According to Dr. Beach, doing Kegel muscle exercises can be one of the most beneficial steps toward bladder health. And, for those who camp in the woods frequently, you may have an advantage. “Studies have shown that squatting to urinate tends to really strengthen their pelvic floor. I'm not sure we're ready to start urinating in holes in the ground, but it does seem to prevent incontinence for women in third world countries,” he said.

Preventing and treating urinary incontinence on a basic level really entails utilizing a healthy Kegel exercise regimen just as you would a normal exercise regimen. For many women, relief for incontinence can be attained through Kegels or other simple nonsurgical methods. “For 50 percent of women, Kegels and weight loss significantly reduce the incidence of incontinence,” said Dr. Beach. “Then there is the issue of urgency incontinence, also called hyperactive bladder. The problem with this type of incontinence is that the bladder sporadically contracts. Turn-key incontinence, where people empty their bladder when they hear the keys in the door, can be worsened by caffeine and alcohol. Treatment for that includes bladder retraining and dietary changes.”

And although it requires some work on a woman's part to really get her bladder back on track, it's a non-surgical solution that can save a lot of anxiety and embarrassment. “There are also medications and implantable nerve stimulators available which can have a huge impact,” explained Dr. Beach. “Eating a diet low in toxins, such as alcohol and caffeine, creates less urinary system irritation.”

Even for more severe causes of incontinence, there are plenty of surgical and non-surgical techniques that allow...
women to be proactive about their bladder health. "For women who have an anatomical abnormality, we'll refer them to a physical therapist that uses biofeedback systems to help retrain pelvic muscles and that can help with incontinence."

Another non-surgical technique to treat incontinence has been around since antiquity. Ancient Egyptian papyrus notes the use of the pessary for pelvic floor prolapse. In modern times, a pessary is made of latex or silicon devices and supports the bladder by resting against the anterior part of the pubic bone. It can come in various forms, depending on the organ or tissue it functions to support, and is specially fitted by a doctor. "Then you go to surgical techniques after that," explained Dr. Beach. "There are procedures that can inject collagen around the urethra to build up the tissue in that area. Then there are slings with mesh that support the urethra, and there's a more aggressive procedure known as the Burch procedure that places the urethra back where it belongs. This procedure has a high success rate approaching 95 percent."

Regardless of the severity of incontinence, Dr. Beach agrees that embarrassment is the unifying symptom that most people experience with incontinence. "The fear of embarrassment is the number one thing that people experience. There is the worry that friends and loved ones are going to discover that you have it, even though many of your friends and family have it too," explained Dr. Beach.

According to Dr. Beach, finding the right provider is the first step to bladder and overall health. "I think that it's important to find a provider with whom you feel comfortable talking about personal issues," Beach said. "Many women have practitioners that they see for years and they don't talk about things like incontinence with them. You need to find a provider who initiates and supports questions regarding these personal issues."