

You don't have to pee your pants laughing

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Dr. Alaa Awadalla

Most of us are familiar with the expression "I laughed so hard I peed my pants." But for women who experience this condition in real life, it is no laughing matter. Approximately one in three women over the age of 60 experiences bladder control problems, with women being twice as likely as men to develop this condition.

Urinary stress incontinence is the technical name for the leakage of urine that occurs during physical activity such as jogging, dancing, and yes – laughing. This leakage is caused by insufficient strength of the pelvic floor muscles. USI can have a negative



Surgery takes the worry out of laughing.

impact on a woman's quality of life, as many women will avoid activities that may put them in embarrassing situations. But there is help available.

Minimally invasive

The first step is determining whether or not you have a problem. Most women will leak slightly when coughing or sneezing, which is completely normal. However, if you are leaking to the point that you can not maintain regular physical activity such as jogging, that is a problem. You can try physiotherapy and pelvic exercises to strengthen these muscles, but if you are leaking to the point that it is affecting your everyday life your physician may recommend surgery as an option.

Fifteen years ago, surgery to correct USI would be a major undertaking. A big cut in the abdomen would be needed, along with a full six-week recovery period during which activities would be limited. There would also be the potential for complications. In 2004, the Victoria General Hospital introduced in Manitoba the use of minimally invasive surgery for USI.

Minimally invasive surgery involves the use of specialized surgical tools which allow complex procedures to be performed using only a few small incisions. The procedure for USI takes around 12 minutes to perform and is considered a day surgery: a patient can arrive in the morning and leave in the afternoon. This procedure has an 80 per cent success rate, which is the same rate as the previous surgery. It requires only two stitches in the birth canal and two small three-millimetre incisions on the inner thighs. The recovery time for this procedure is drastically reduced, with many patients able to go for a short walk within three days following surgery.

Common at the Vic

From the taxpayer's point of view, minimally invasive surgery is more efficient in terms of money, time and other resources. Major surgery for USI would require a four-day hospital stay at a cost of about \$4,800 and two hours of operating room time at a cost of about \$1,440. A hospital stay related to a minimally invasive day surgery procedure would cost the healthcare system about \$960, along with about \$500 for the TVT-O tape device used in the procedure and 45 minutes of operating room time costing about \$540. In summary, the cost to treat USI with major surgery is over \$6,200, compared a minimally invasive procedure costing around \$2,000.

There are also indirect savings that occur because the patient is able to go back to work sooner. Looking at the cost savings for taxpayers along with the inherent patient benefits of less time spent in OR and in hospital, less invasive surgery and less risk of complications and it is no wonder the Vic is performing over 400 USI minimally invasive surgeries per year.

Readers should, therefore, take note that they don't have to pee their pants laughing. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to seek help. Studies show it takes a healthy adult with USI nearly seven years to do something about this problem, but there is no need to suffer in silence. There are realistic treatments available that will help get you back to your regular physical routine of jogging, dancing, and best of all – laughing. *Dr. Alaa Awadalla is an obstetrician gynecologist at the Victoria General Hospital. He specializes in minimal invasive gynecology.*