

New nonsurgical treatment can ease stress incontinence

(<http://www.suntimes.com/lifestyles/streicher/156068,CST-FTR-obgyn01.article>)

December 1, 2006

BY LAUREN STREICHER

Q. *Since I gave birth to my kids, I lose urine every time I cough, laugh or sneeze. I have read about a minor surgical procedure to fix that, but I had to avoid heavy lifting for six weeks for good results. With three kids under the age of 6, that's pretty much impossible.*

A. What you are describing is stress incontinence, a condition caused by weakened pelvic tissue that allows the urethra to drop into an abnormal position every time you do anything that increases your abdominal pressure.

About 80 percent of the estimated 15 million women with stress incontinence do nothing about it. They just assume it is a "normal" part of aging, or don't want to opt for a surgical procedure because of potential complications and recovery time.

There are nonsurgical options available, however. To start, an evaluation to determine the type of incontinence you have is critical. If you have genuine stress incontinence, a trained pelvic physical therapist can work with you to strengthen pelvic floor muscles. To find a therapist in your area, check out the section on women's health of the American PT Association's Web site (www.apta.org); click on "Find a PT" and in the box asking for "expertise," click on women's health).

Total Control Programs are fitness and lifestyle classes designed to strengthen the pelvic floor and abdominal wall muscles necessary for bladder control. This program goes way beyond Kegel exercises. Up to 25 percent of women report that their symptoms are alleviated at the end of the seven-week program. For more information, go to the Web site www.totalcontrolprogram.com.

The most exciting new, nonsurgical option for stress incontinence is a simple office technique recently approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

The Renessa Procedure (www.novasysmedical.com) takes about 30 minutes, is performed with local anesthesia, is largely pain-free and requires no recovery time.

During this treatment, the physician passes a small heated probe through the urethral opening; the probe changes the tissue structure of the upper part of the urethra and lower part of the bladder. The result is that the tissue is stiffer, and therefore is better able to resist the involuntary leakage of urine that occurs with increased abdominal pressure.

In initial studies, 76 percent of women experienced either a reduction or complete resolution of incontinence. No one knows how long the results last, since Renessa has been used only for four years. But there seems to be very little downside for the woman who doesn't want a more invasive procedure and is really tired of laughing with her legs crossed.

Lauren Streicher, M.D., practices at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. Her column appears every other Friday. E-mail drstreicher@suntimes.com.