

## It's important to talk about female incontinence

**A**s a sex columnist, I find people I've just met often tell me things perfect strangers probably have no right knowing. Like "Maria," who recently confided that she's so afraid of losing control of her bladder that she no longer enjoys sex with her husband.

Unfortunately, for women like Maria who suffer from a condition known as "urge incontinence," peeing is not optional. When she's gotta go, she's really gotta go.

"There are usually no warning signs," says Kelli Berzuk, a physiotherapist specializing in incontinence and pelvic pain and author of *I Laughed So Hard: A Woman's Essential Guide for Improved Bladder Control* (available through [www.ilaughedsohard.com](http://www.ilaughedsohard.com)). "Women suffering from urgency feel an intense pressure and a need to void immediately. This can happen anywhere and at any time."

Which can be a tad embarrassing. But that's the problem, says Berzuk. Despite the fact that it's estimated that half the female population will at some point experience some form of incontinence (according to the Mayo Clinic), leaky bladders aren't exactly considered an appropriate cocktail-party discussion.

There is, however, plenty that we gals can do before things get really bad.

First step: Admit you have a problem. "If we learn to look for warning signs, we can do something about it," says Berzuk.

Like ease up on the Diet Coke. "Caffeine, artificial sweeteners and carbonated beverages can irritate the bladder lining, and over time, cause

urgency," explains Berzuk. Smoking and alcohol can also contribute to bladder dysfunction and incontinence, whether that's leaking when you sneeze or laugh, or having to go to the bathroom a zillion times a day.

But be warned, holding off on liquids so you won't have to go as often may actually worsen the problem. Besides, holding your pee too long stresses out your bladder. Having said that, going too often—more than, say, eight or nine times a day—could signal an already irritated bladder. A woman with a healthy bladder should pee between five and nine times in a day and up to one time at night, says Berzuk.

And while you may pride yourself on your balancing skills as you hover precariously over a less-than-pristine public toilet seat, your bladder is literally bearing the brunt.

"Healthy bladder function is all about the relationship between the pelvic floor muscle and the bladder muscle," explains Berzuk. "When you relax your pelvic floor muscle, it sends a message to your bladder muscle to contract and empty. If you're hovering, your legs are contracting and your abdomen is contracting, so the pelvic floor muscle isn't relaxed and you're pushing the urine out. Voiding should be a passive event, it should never be forced."

So, next time, cover the seat with toilet paper if you must.

You also want to whip those pelvic muscles into shape through Kegel exercises (squeezing as if you're stopping the flow of urine). Just make sure you're doing them right. "Some women actually worsen incontinence prob-

lems by bearing down rather than pulling the muscle up and in," she says.

Strong pelvic floor muscles can also help stop pee leakage during sex and certain sexual positions may help if incontinence is a problem. "Lying down is better," Berzuk says. "If you're standing or sitting, gravity is pushing the pelvic organs downward, and putting pressure on your pelvic floor muscles. Deep thrusting can also trigger bladder muscle spasms."

But, she stresses, every woman's anatomy is different and it's best to try various positions to see what works best for you.

While it's certainly true that pregnancy and childbirth also put added pressure on the bladder and pelvic muscles, you're not automatically sentenced to incontinence.

"[It's best] to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles before you get pregnant," Berzuk says. "That way, you'll know how to find that muscle and gingerly work it even when everything feels throbbly, bruised, and mushy down there after childbirth." Luckily, female incontinence is pee.

treatable. "Ours is caused by muscle neglect, hormonal changes, weight gain, and so on, while men usually become incontinent as a result of prostate enlargement or nerve damage caused by prostate surgery," explains Berzuk.

While it's time to admit that bladder control problems aren't reserved for old gals or those of us who have popped out a bunch of kids ("We're seeing this now in teenage girls involved in high-impact sports"), we don't have to accept it as part of life as a woman.

"It's important to address the problem rather than the symptoms," says Berzuk. "If we were able to talk about it more easily with other women, we could recognize the signs early on when we can still do something about it."

So, ladies, next time you're at a party and see a woman drinking a

Diet Coke and crossing her legs when she sneezes, strike up a conversation. Tell her about this great book you've been reading about

