

UW Health: Women still face stigma related to pelvic floor disorders

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MADISON, Wis. – Many women, young and old, delay seeking care for pelvic floor disorder symptoms, often feeling uncomfortable talking about them, but a simple conversation can start the process to end the sometimes-daily disruptions their symptoms can cause.

For women, symptoms like leaking, strong urges to go to the bathroom, or discomfort and heaviness in the vagina, can disrupt daily life and are caused by a variety of factors like age, weight or having had children, and these symptoms are caused by what are commonly called pelvic floor disorders.

The reasons women wait are varied, but the stigma surrounding pelvic floor disorders is often a driving force causing people to manage problems on their own much longer than they need to, according to Dr. Frank Lin, urologist, UW Health, and assistant professor of urology, UW School of Medicine and Public Health, who specializes in treating pelvic floor disorders.

“We hear stories far too often of women who lived with disruptive symptoms without knowing that the care that could have solved their problem was available all along,” he said. “I want women, and men, to know that their providers want to help and can be trusted to manage their care privately and with compassion.”

One in four women ages 20-39 experience pelvic floor disorders, but as much as around 40% of women older than 80 years old experience them, and historically they all wait years to seek treatment, according to Lin. In the United States, 33% of women waited one to five years to visit a provider and 26% waited more than five years, he said.

UW Health offers a host of treatments for pelvic floor disorders from the simple act of medical observation and lifestyle management to more intense actions like the use of medications and even surgery if needed, Lin said.

Care for women with complex pelvic floor disorders such as stress urinary incontinence, pelvic organ prolapse and overactive bladder is a cornerstone of UW Health's upcoming Eastpark Medical Center, which broke ground this summer, located near East Madison Hospital.

September is Urology Awareness Month, and a great opportunity to bring positive attention to this issue to help end the stigma associated with pelvic floor disorders, Lin said.

"In media, advertising and popular culture, we all hear about benign prostatic hyperplasia, or BPH, and other prostate issues and they are becoming more normalized, but just as many women suffer in silence," he said. "I want women throughout our state and region to know health care providers hear you, and we are here to help."

Lin is available for interviews today and a recorded interview is also available.