

Be prepared — before and after

■ **Question:** How can bladders become weak in otherwise healthy women?

■ **Answer:** Many women have no problems as a result of birth but for others consequences of vaginal delivery can be both distressing and embarrassing – yet that doesn't mean vaginal delivery should be avoided

Many pregnant women find that they pass urine more frequently which is due in part to the baby's head pressing on the bladder and quite often women also leak urine when coughing or sneezing - a condition that is known as stress incontinence.

For most this resolves when the baby is born but for others - particularly those who had a long labour, large baby or forceps delivery - it continues, says Andrew Hextall, consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist at St Albans City Hospital and Spire Hospital Harpenden, and a specialist in urogynaecology.

“Pelvic floor exercises help the majority of patients but it can take

several weeks or months to regain full control of the bladder. Fortunately there are now simple day-case operations to treat stress incontinence,” says Mr Hextall. “However, it is usually best to try pelvic floor exercises first and most surgeons recommend that surgery is performed when no more children are planned, as another pregnancy or vaginal delivery risks a recurrence of urinary leakage which can be more troublesome to treat second time around.”

Can stress incontinence be prevented and is a Caesarean section the answer? Performing pelvic floor exercises during pregnancy helps to maintain bladder control both before and after delivery, says Hextall. “A planned Caesarean section may prevent bladder and vaginal problems but it is a major procedure,” points out Mr Hextall. “In addition, patients having three or more Caesarean sections are probably just as likely to have stress incontinence as women having a vaginal birth because this condition is in part due to the pressure of a pregnancy. Most obstetricians recommend a vaginal birth whenever possible.”



Mr Andrew Hextall

A specialist in urogynaecology

EMILY DAVIES

info.uk@mediaplanet.com