Urinary incontinence - no need to suffer in silence

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MANY women leak urine at some point in their life and it is thought that about 20% of ladies have regular episodes of urinary incontinence. This means that a huge number of people in the UK will be affected and there are probably about 8,000 women within West Hertfordshire who have problems with bladder control. Perhaps because of embarrassment it is sometimes difficult to talk about this problem even with close friends or your GP. However, there is no need to suffer in silence because if you have this problem you are not alone and there are excellent local NHS and private services available to help.

Types of Incontinence:
• Stress incontinence is the most common type of urinary leakage and is more likely to occur in those women who have had a vaginal birth or difficult delivery (although this isn’t always the case). Characteristically women leak with coughing, sneezing or exercise and this can interfere with family and personal relationships.
• Some women suddenly feel the need to go to the toilet (also known as urgency) and if they don’t make it they can have an accident - this is called Urgo incontinence. This type of incontinence is most often due to an overactive bladder, a problem which becomes more common as you get older. Often women also need to go to the toilet frequently during the day and have to get up to pass urine during the night.
• Some women have both types of leakage and they are then said to have Mixed incontinence.

What treatment is available?
Pelvic floor exercises, sometimes under the supervision of a physiotherapist, can help approximately 60% of patients with stress incontinence. If they don’t produce sufficient improvement most women will be suitable to have Tension-free Vaginal Tape (TVT) operation. This is a simple and safe day case procedure which normally takes 20-30 minutes to perform usually under a general anaesthetic. A sling is placed under the bladder to give it more support (see picture below) using tiny incisions in the pubic hair and vagina. Approximately 90-95% of women will no longer leak when they cough or exercise when many patients saying “I have been given my life back.”

Women with urge incontinence need to make sure they don’t drink excessively and have too much tea or coffee as this may exacerbate their problem. It is sometimes possible to retrain the bladder so that it gets back into good habits. If this doesn’t work medication may help. Botulinum injections can help some women having severe leakage problems due to an overactive bladder but research on their long term effectiveness is lacking and they are not widely available.

How do I get help?
Not everyone who leaks urine will want to have treatment. Some women prefer to wear a pad or stop doing the type of exercise which causes the leakage (e.g. running). However, if you would like help please speak to your GP or practice nurse who may try some treatments or refer you to the continence team if necessary. It is most likely that the treatment will help and, if the leaking stops, you will regain your confidence and feel much better in yourself.

ARE the people of Harpenden hanging their heads in shame? Why? Well for those who haven’t heard, Harpenden recently came 3rd in a survey of neighbourhoods who are the worst polluters according to their carbon footprint breakdown. It seems the average British household produces 29 tons of carbon each year (which is lower than the US whose output is practically double ours but high compared to countries like India). So, how does Harpenden compare to the average? It seems we produce 35.28 tons per year per household. For the record, the lowest in the UK is Newcastle-upon-Tyne with just 14.86 tons. But how can areas differ so much? Simple, the more money you have, the bigger the house to heat, the bigger the car you drive, the more holidays you take and the more exotic the food you eat. So, if you live in a huge house, drive a gas-guzzling 4x4, take two foreign holidays a year and eat prawns flown in from Malaysia and green beans from Kenya your carbon footprint is enormous.

The charity shop. Ok, let’s start with a really easy one. Every high street has at least one charity shop. Simply drop a bag of clean, unwanted clothes into the shop and the staff will give you a big smile - better than putting them in the bin. Someone will then buy them and wear them. Genius!

2. Don’t forget your friends. You may have a special dress that is still perfect but just not longer fits, or a mountain of children’s clothes that has been outgrown by your own family. Don’t be shy, many of us would be only too delighted to expand our wardrobes at no cost to ourselves.

3. Give your unwanted stuff to a stranger. Visit www.freecycle.org. This is a great website that matches up people who need things with those that have them and no longer need them like Nord’s Multi-Coloured Swap Shop but without the jazzy tank top and the mallet!

4. Take a look at your car. Is it really necessary, does it have to be that big? Could you walk more often? Maybe when you next trade your car in you might go for something a little bit more practical with a smaller engine. If a Prius is good enough for Cameron Diaz, Brad Pitt and Tom Hanks it’s good enough for me.

5. Save energy at home. If you are fortunate enough to have a large home you could still make it more energy efficient. Make sure you turn off a light as you leave a room and use low-energy light bulbs, turn your boiler down one degree and never leave a television of other equipment on standby.

That’s it, ravens. I just feel that as a parent we owe it to our children to do what we can to save the planet - as they say, every little helps.

Kathy Newport