



Mary Jane Minkin, MD, is a board-certified obstetrician/gynecologist in private practice in New Haven, Conn., and a clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Yale University School of Medicine. Dr. Minkin is a recipient of the Irving Friedman Award, given by Yale School of Medicine's Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology for excellence in clinical abilities and patient care, and has twice been awarded the Resident's Teaching Award for best community attending physician. She is lead author or coauthor of articles in numerous peer-reviewed journals and coauthor of *What Every Woman Needs to Know about Menopause*, Yale University Press, 1996. She also gives lectures to a menopause support group called Red Hot Mamas. Dr. Minkin lives in Connecticut with her husband and two children.

When the Bottom Drops Out

"I get a feeling of heaviness in my vaginal area, and sometimes it feels like my insides are dropping. I'm afraid to tell my doctor in case it means I need surgery. What should I do?"

From the sound of your symptoms, I'd bet that you have some degree of pelvic floor relaxation, which goes by the fancy name of pelvic organ prolapse. This doesn't automatically mean that you need surgery. In fact, a little muscle rehab may be enough to relieve your symptoms.

Your Support System

Normally, an assortment of muscles, ligaments, connective tissue, and nerves all work together to support your pelvic organs, which include your bladder, uterus, vagina, and rectum. If the muscles become weak or the ligaments and tissues become stretched or damaged, any one of these organs can drop down and press against the walls of the vagina.

The result is the feeling of heaviness or the sensation that things are dropping out that you describe. Some women may have a pulling sensation or achiness in their pelvic area, leak urine, or have trouble moving their bowels. If the prolapse is severe enough, the pelvic organs can bulge into the walls of the vagina, causing tissue to protrude through your vaginal opening. Don't worry, it's not a tumor.

An Unrecognized Problem

Pelvic organ prolapse is almost exclusively a woman's health problem and one that affects many women. According to a new Australian study, 46% of all women have some type of pelvic floor problem. We can thank our unique anatomy, which is designed to enable us to be pregnant and give birth. The additional weight a woman carries when she is pregnant, along with the stresses of labor and vaginal delivery can leave the ligaments and muscles stretched and weak. Even if you haven't had children, the loss of estrogen at menopause as well as normal aging can cause the pelvic tissues to weaken.

Unfortunately, physicians aren't looking for signs of pelvic organ prolapse frequently enough, and women aren't telling their physicians when their pelvic area or bottom feels different or when they're experiencing any of the above symptoms.

Don't let fear or embarrassment prevent you from sharing this with your gynecologist or primary care physician. Pelvic organ prolapse can worsen over time. The sooner you learn the extent of your problem, the sooner you can take steps to remedy it.

Get the Right Exam

A thorough pelvic exam is the key to getting an accurate diagnosis. "Your doctor or health care provider should examine you while you are lying down in the usual stirrup position as well as standing up to identify the specific area of the vagina that is affected and to what degree," recommends Linda Brubaker, MD, a noted specialist in female pelvic medicine and reconstructive surgery at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood, IL.

Your doctor will ask you to bear down or contract your pelvic muscles so that she can identify whether the prolapse of the vagina is in the front (anterior or bladder area), back (posterior or bowel area), or top (superior or uterine area). While the preferred term to use in pelvic organ prolapse with a description of the part of the vagina affected, your doctor may use terms such as Cystocele (bladder), Rectocele (rectum), or uterine prolapse (uterus) to explain what structures are involved.

If your doctor isn't familiar with pelvic organ prolapse, find one who diagnoses and treats it as a part of their daily practice. And always seek a second opinion before agreeing to any type of surgery to correct the problem. Contact a teaching hospital or major medical center in your area. (Some hospitals have special centers for pelvic floor disorders and physicians who specialize in treating them.)

Get into Rehab

"Virtually every patient with pelvic organ prolapse can be helped with muscle rehabilitation," reassures Dr. Brubaker. "My goal is always to bring her symptoms under control as quickly and simply as possible, which can be done by working with a pelvic floor physical therapist or nurse practitioner who is skilled at helping women use these muscles properly."

Dr. Brubaker cautions that while most communities have physical therapists, not all of them are familiar with pelvic floor rehab. For a list of physical therapists who specialize in women's health in your area, call the American Physical Therapy Association at (703)706-3229. Be sure to ask the therapist if she treats pelvic floor disorders.

You may be wondering why you can't just do Kegel exercises on your own. Dr. Brubaker explains that "it's critical to make sure you're contracting the right muscles with just the right intensity and for the right amount of time." One way to do this is with the help of biofeedback therapy, which allows you to see on a computer screen when you're contracting the correct muscles.

How long does it take to see results? "Very weak muscles take a longer time to rehabilitate," says Dr. Brubaker. "But with a weekly session and daily home exercises, most women see progress in as little as 4 to 6 weeks."

In addition to a program of muscle strengthening, you can be fitted for a ring-like device called a pessary, which helps prop up or support the pelvic organs. (It fits into your vagina and is removable.) Many women find the combination of two enough to relieve their symptoms without surgery.

"If the simple things haven't helped or a patient isn't willing to try them and just wants me to fix the problem, then surgery is an appropriate option to consider," explains Dr. Brubaker. But she adds that there are always other options besides surgery, although it may be the most definitive treatment.

Try to avoid pelvic organ prolapse in the first place by keeping your pelvic floor muscles in good shape with these tips:

- Lose excess weight.
- Don't smoke.
- Avoid constipation and straining with bowel movements.
- Avoid constant heavy lifting.
- Get a chronic cough due to allergies under control.
- Practice Kegel exercises regularly while laying down, sitting and standing. Try a set of 10 three times a day, holding each contraction for about 10 seconds. (Have your health care provider or doctor check to see that you're doing them correctly.)

After pregnancy and delivery, be alert for signs that you've lost some pelvic support. Early muscle rehab can minimize your problems down the road.