



## ***Kids, gravity and time: pelvic floor damage***

Gypsy Rose Lee, the 1940's film, stage and TV star once said: "I have everything I had twenty years ago, only it's all a little lower." It's a fact. Our bodies are all subject to the wear of time and gravity. Women bravely shoulder the additional burden of carrying and birthing children. Like gravity and time, the kind act of giving birth can have long-term, physically unkind effects.

The whole idea of passing a very large object (a baby) through what is normally a very small space, is miraculous, unbelievable, and extraordinary. To those who contemplate doing it, it has to be a bit frightening. The good news is that billions of women succeed at it, and the vast majority of women suffer no long term physical consequences (other than having to clothe and feed a human that will think you are stupid in 11-12 years).

Uncommonly, the process of childbirth can cause trauma and damage, and this damage may not be detectable or cause any problems until years later. The uterus and vagina are held in place and are supported by an intricate web of muscles, rope-like ligaments and canvas-like fascia. This web is designed to expand to allow child birth and then contract to its prepregnancy state.

This strong web, referred to as the pelvic floor, can sometimes be stretched or even torn, to where it does not return to its original form. Nerves that ordinarily cause pelvic floor muscles to contract, can be damaged, causing weakness.

Damage or changes of the pelvic floor can occur in different areas. Looking at it simply, the damage can be one of six types: cystocele, rectocele, enterocele, vaginal or uterine prolapse, stress urinary incontinence, and perineal relaxation.

**Cystocele** – (siss-toe-seal) – The wall between bladder and vagina has stretched or torn, causing the bladder to bulge into, or even out of the vagina. This can cause discomfort and recurrent urinary tract infections.

**Rectocele** – (wreck-toe-seal) – The wall between rectum and vagina has stretched or torn, causing the rectum to bulge into, or even out of the vagina. This makes having bowel movements difficult or painful.

**Enterocoele** – (enter-oh-seal) – Intestines have herniated through the pelvic floor and bulge into the vagina. This can cause continuous pain.

**Uterine prolapse** – (pro-laps) – Prolapse means ‘to fall or fall out’. In this case the uterus falls to the opening of the vagina, or even protrudes out of the vagina. It can be uncomfortable or painful.

**Vaginal prolapse** – In women who have had a hysterectomy, the vagina can essentially turn inside-out, protruding like a balloon from the vagina, causing a very uncomfortable feeling.

**Stress urinary incontinence** – Because of a urethra that falls with pressure, women with this condition leak urine every time they cough, laugh, sneeze, jog, jump, etc.

**Perineal relaxation** – (perry-neal) -- In this condition, the muscles that form the opening of the vagina become abnormally stretched.

Often several of these defects occur at the same time. Many women tolerate these painful or embarrassing conditions, thinking they have no choice. Fortunately, each of these conditions can be delicately repaired. If you think you suffer from one or more of these conditions, contact a gynecologist who routinely treats them.

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