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Women's Health: Fact vs. Fiction

Local experts weigh in on the 15 things
our mothers never told us.

By Melissa Jacobs

Illustration by Sarah Ferone

Nowadays, parents talk to their kids about almost everything. But anyone over 35 grew up with certain taboo topics. Sex? Anxiety and depression? Addictions? Our mothers would've told us about those things. Trouble is, no one told them. Here's the truth about women's health from an all-female panel of healthcare experts.

Myth: Women don't always enjoy sex.

Truth: Intimacy is critical to a relationship—and sex should not hurt.

Pain during intercourse is so common that there's a medical term for it: dyspareunia. Dr. Lynn Wang, a Main Line Health gynecologist and certified sexuality counselor, explains that dyspareunia can be caused by many things, including dryness, irritation from feminine products and infections. Other issues, like physical insecurities and the anticipation of pain, can turn into self-fulfilling issues. "They become cognitive distractions, which are thoughts and feelings that prevent women from being able to focus on pleasure during intimacy," Wang says. "Fortunately, sexual health is becoming more recognized as an important part of overall health, and many of these types of issues are treatable." *To find a certified sexual health professional in this area, visit www.aasect.org/referral-directory.*

Myth: Urinary incontinence is part of getting older.

Truth: It's not, and it can be a symptom of a larger problem.

Stress incontinence—releasing small quantities of urine when laughing, sneezing

or coughing—has jokingly become known as "the squirts." It's no laughing matter to Hina Sheth, owner of ReBalance in Narberth and Center City. "It's not normal, not even after several kids," Sheth says.

It can be a symptom—along with pain in the lower back and elsewhere—that the abdominals and pelvic floor have been compromised. This can lead to long term issues that worsen as women age, explains Sheth, a mother of three who has training in women's health and muscular skeletal systems. Sheth's practice incorporates therapies for patients' abdominals, diaphragms, low backs, pelvic floors and other areas. "People get physical therapy to address problems with other muscles," Sheth says. "Women often need help with this part of their bodies, too."

Myth: Kegel exercises improve intercourse.

Truth: Kegels can exacerbate problems with the pelvic floor.

Few women understand the mysteries of their pelvic floors. For starters, the pelvic floor is compromised of 14 muscles. "Each of those muscles can have different tightness and weakness," Sheth says. "Tightening everything can be a mistake and lead to more problems." Too much weakness is a different problem, one commonly encountered after vaginal births and C-sections. Women may then have a mix of pelvic floor weakness and tightness. Constipation, incontinence, urinary frequency, urethra pain, UTIs, vaginal pain and hip, back and GI problems can be caused by pelvic floor dysfunction.

"Often, it's all one in the same," Sheth says. Addressing these problems begins with a proper diagnosis of which muscles are compromised followed by physical therapy.

Myth: Skincare products should have SPF 15.

Truth: SPF 30 is the minimum.

Not wearing the proper sunscreen is the biggest skin care mistake women make, says Dr. Christine Stanko of Bryn Mawr Dermatology. SPF 30 should be worn every day, even when women think they aren't in the sun. Walking from a parking lot into a store, even on a cloudy day, can cause skin damage. UV rays can pass through glass, as well. "Bottom line, a woman doesn't need to be lounging on the beach to be exposed to age-accelerating and cancer-causing UV rays," says Stanko. "Sunscreen of SPF 30 or higher should be a part of the daily morning routine."

Myth: Wrinkling? Get Botox.

Truth: Botox isn't right for everyone. For natural-looking results, consult a cosmetic doctor.

Ask for Botox and you'll get it, especially if you use a Groupon or a specific product. But that may not be the most effective anti-aging treatment, Stanko cautions. "It is easy to see 'bad' or over-done cosmetic treatments," Stanko says. "Natural looking results, based on the skill of the provider, are hard to notice, if at all. It's just a better, younger-looking you."

Stanko explains the difference: Botox targets wrinkles like frown lines or crow's