

ARE FEMALE ADOLESCENTS EAGER TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE PELVIC FLOOR?

Hypothesis / aims of study

Female Pelvic floor dysfunction (PFD) is an important health care issue, because of its high prevalence, its invalidating effect on quality of life and its impact on the health care system. Multiparity, menopause, pregnancy and childbirth are some of the most important risk factors for PFD.

Although pelvic floor muscle training is recommended as first-line treatment and prevention strategy for PFD in women, the prevalence rates of PFD remain very high in women during the reproductive age and beyond. Feelings of embarrassment and shame, combined with insufficient knowledge and misperceptions about PFD are the largest barriers to seeking care [1, 2]. PFD remains a taboo topic and is underreported.

The prevalence of PFD in healthy female adolescents (4 to 6% occasionally urinary incontinence) is low [3], but nevertheless, their exposure to the most common risk factors (such as pregnancy and delivery) is approaching while they are growing up to sexual active young females. Therefore primary prevention should ideally start in adolescence.

To the best of our knowledge, no previous research ever studied the knowledge of PFD in female adolescents. Asking young females questions about the intimate pelvic floor seem to form an ethical dilemma and may therefore be avoided. The objective of this research was to investigate whether adolescent girls ever received information about the pelvic floor muscles (PFM) and PFD; whether they are interested to receive more information about these topics; and through which canals they would prefer to get informed. In a small sample of this group of adolescent girls, the knowledge of the PFM function was also investigated.

Study design, materials and methods

Cross-sectional survey design. A reliable and valid questionnaire was distributed to female adolescents (12-18 years old) in High Schools, technical education and vocational schools. All participants and their parents were informed about the research goals and were asked to sign an informed consent form. A small sample received four supplementary questions about the function of the PFM. Descriptive statistics were generated for all variables, Chi-square tests were used.

Results

A total of 399 questionnaires were distributed, the responses of 381 female adolescents (mean age= 15.0, SD= 1.78) were included (response rate 95.5%). All girls and their parents signed the informed consent form. Sixteen percent (n= 61) of the 381 adolescents ever received information about PFM, mostly during comprehensive sex education on School. A total of 166 (44%) girls wants to receive further information on this topic; 136 (36%) is not interested and 65 (17%) is undecided. 140 (36%) girls answered that they already searched for information on their own, through friends or family; while more than half of all girls (n= 221, 58%) would prefer to be informed through school, in group. A sample of 100 girls were asked if they knew the function of the PFM: 76 (76%) declined, only 25 (25%) knew the closure function; 21 (21%) the support function and 22 (22%) the sexual function of the PFM.

Interpretation of results

The test results reveal that most adolescent girls have a lack of knowledge about the PFM function. Most adolescent females were never informed about the PFM and PFD. Although general anatomy courses and sex education are included in every high school educational programme. One could assume that the topic PFM and possible PFD is considered not important for young female adolescents; another explanation might be that the topic is avoided because PFD is considered as a taboo or to intimate to teach about. Although the results reveal that the majority of the adolescents clearly prefers to get better informed about these topics, ideally through school, in group.

We therefore argue that information about the PFM and possible PFD should be included and discussed during their general education in High School. Because PFD are highly prevalent during the lifetime of women (and men) and should not be a taboo to talk about.

Concluding message

The present research is the first to reveal that young female adolescents have a lack of knowledge about the pelvic floor and its (dys)function; and are interested to get better informed. If these topics would be discussed in their general education, through school, the taboo about pelvic floor dysfunction later in life could be diminished.

References

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