

Racing to the ladies? NHS can now help with urinary incontinence

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The NHS is launching specialist clinics to prevent and treat incontinence and other pelvic problems,

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At last! The NHS is to launch a specialist service to help with female incontinence. Thousands of women will benefit from dedicated pelvic health clinics.

Seven million women in the UK suffer urinary incontinence, usually during pregnancy and following childbirth. It is often hidden and can limit the lives of even relatively young women and affect their mental wellbeing.

The most common form, stress incontinence, caused by a weakening of the pelvic floor muscles, is a tendency to leak while coughing or during exercise. The second type, urge incontinence, features a sudden, strong urge to pass water. Some women suffer both.

Getting help can be tricky. Many women feel embarrassed, and some who do seek help can spend years getting a diagnosis.

The NHS is launching specialist clinics to prevent and treat incontinence and other pelvic problems, bringing midwives, doctors and physiotherapists together in one service.

Every woman receiving maternity care in areas with the clinics will be able to access them throughout their pregnancies and afterwards, NHS officials said. Help offered will include access to exercise classes to help prevent problems developing in the first place.

The setup is loosely based on the model in France. There, new mothers are offered ten sessions of pelvic floor physical therapy. Midwives and physiotherapists support women soon after having a baby to retrain pelvic floor muscles, with exercises to take away as “homework”.

Pregnancy and delivery can put serious strain on pelvic floor muscles, which is why so many mothers suffer from leaks, pain, pelvic organ prolapse and muscle weakness. One in three women experience incontinence in the year after having a baby and for as many as three quarters of these women it persists in the 12 years after giving birth. One in 12 women will have a pelvic organ prolapse.

Emma Crookes, 34, a former veterinary nurse and now a full-time mother to Harriet, 4, and Isaac, 5, suffered “horrendous” incontinence during and after her two pregnancies.

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“Having my children was wonderful but the incontinence I suffered was horrendous mentally and physically,” she said. “I was too embarrassed to tell my midwife but I couldn’t leave the house because of the pain and inconvenience and my partner had to take time off work to support me.”

Crookes said that before she became pregnant her female friends had told her that incontinence was “normal” and something she would simply have to “deal with”. She said: “I had no idea I could get medical help for it. All the adverts for pads on TV make it seem like you just have to put up with it and my friends thought the same, they just said it was a normal part of having kids.

“I spent a small fortune on pads before I sought help and got a personalised care plan from NHS specialists.”

Crookes, from Barnsley, was given access to a three-month physiotherapy programme and one-to-one guidance on how to strengthen her pelvic muscles, which resolved her problems. “These new clinics for women to get the support I got, in one place, will make a difference to so many people like me.”

Fourteen areas across England will host the first clinics, with 175,000 new mothers to benefit in the first year. The initial 14 clinics will serve women in Birmingham, Bristol, Cornwall, Dorset, Surrey, Herefordshire, Hertfordshire, Lancashire, Norfolk, northwest London, Shrewsbury, southeast London, Suffolk and Sussex. The number of clinics will be expanded over the coming two years and will eventually serve millions of women.

GPs will be able to direct women to the services. Women will also be able to self-refer. “We know many women don’t report issues with incontinence because they are embarrassed about seeking help,” said Professor Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent, NHS England’s chief midwifery officer.

“Bringing together experts in pelvic health in one place will offer women a way of seeking help quickly and easily, as well as sending the message that postnatal incontinence is nothing to be ashamed of and can be treated.”

She added: “We all have a duty to share evidence-based messages — including that incontinence products are, primarily, a temporary support, and women with incontinence should seek medical support. We must make sure that these messages are reinforced wherever possible, and not contradicted. Our message to women is that issues like incontinence are preventable and treatable and that the NHS is there for them if they need support, including at these 14 new sites.”

The plans have emerged as the government [urges women to give evidence](#) about their care to shape strategy on women’s health.

Last week Nadine Dorries, the health minister, said that women should challenge doctors who fob them off. Asked on BBC Radio 4’s *Woman’s Hour* whether the NHS was sexist, she said: “I think it is to a degree. The core theme of most of the reports we have are: women are not listened to. “I’ve experienced that myself, I know how it happens, I know how the system shuts down a complaint, shuts down a woman who has issues with either treatment or surgery or a wrong diagnosis.”

The call for evidence closes tonight. More than 100,000 women, organisations, clinicians and carers have responded so far.