

Author(s) S. Siracusano, R. Pregazzi, P. Di Benedetto*, G. Pappagallo**, F. Plaino,
 G. d'Aloia, A. Sartore, S. Stener, V. Pecorari
 Institution, city, country Department of Urology and Rehabilitation*, University of Trieste, Italy
 Department of Oncology**, Noale - Venice, Italy
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EPIDEMIOLOGICAL STUDY OF URINARY INCONTINENCE IN YOUNG AND MIDDLE AGED WOMEN

Aims of study

Urinary incontinence (UI) in female is a common health problem with severe economic and emotional impact. This distressing condition, if present in young and middle aged women, represents an underdiagnosed and undertreated problem.

Aim of this study was to evaluate the prevalence and characteristics of UI in a female population aged between 18 to 49 years and to investigate patient perceptions regarding psychological, relational and sexual functions.

Materials and Methods

The target population was represented by the 44,095 females aged 18-49.9 living in our urban area at December 1998. Six age subgroups were considered for analysis (percent of the entire population): 18-24.9 (15.1%), 25-29.9 (16.7%), 30-34.9 (18.8%), 35-39.9 (17.1%), 40-44.9 (15.8%), 45-49.9 (16.5%).

The expected prevalence of incontinence in the age subgroup planned to be the smallest-in-size (i.e. 18-29.9 years) was of around 5%. A sample of 10,000 subjects was considered as able to provide for the analysis at least 600 cases from this subgroup, if at least 40% of females will return back the questionnaire. A computer-based, pseudo-random procedure selected 1510 cases from the 18-24.9, 1673 from the 25-29.9, 1877 from the 30-34.9, 1703 from the 35-39.9, 1583 from the 40-44.9, 1654 from the 45-49.9 age subgroup, respectively.

Results

3557 out of 10000 females did adhere to the project, but 657 of 3557 (18.5%) did not fill the age field in the questionnaire. The aged-based analysis was performed on 2900 subjects. The distribution of females by age subgroup was as follows: 18-24.9 = 12.5%, 25-29.9 = 14.7%, 30-34.9 = 19.5%, 35-39.9 = 18.0%, 40-44.9 = 17.4%, 45-49.9 = 17.9%; thus, females aged <30 years provided a lower response to the questionnaire than expected.

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The cohort of 2900 females referred a prevalence of urinary incontinence of 20% (581 out of 2900), this rate being similar to that calculated on the 3557 adhering females (711 out of 3557, 19.99%).

The prevalence of urinary incontinence by age subgroup was: 18-24.9 = 0%, 25-29.9 = 10.3%, 30-34.9 = 16.7%, 35-39.9 = 23.2%, 40-44.9 = 27.2%, 45-49.9 = 35.4%.

Regarding the onset of urinary incontinence, 10.9% of females were affected by nocturnal enuresis before 18 years old, 46.6% of parous women noted a relationship between the beginning of UI and delivery.

Among the incontinent women 83.1% referred loss of urine associated with physical exertion (66% for <30 vs. 85% for ≥30 years old subjects), 43.5% referred urge incontinence (61% for <30 vs. 42% for ≥30 years old subjects), 17.7% usually used diapers (11% for <30 vs. 18% for ≥30 years old subjects), 19.8% had consulted a physician and half of these referred previous medical, surgical or rehabilitative therapy, 50.1% reported past or present urinary infections (70% for <30 vs. 48% for ≥30 years old subjects), 8% complained also of faecal incontinence (14% for <30 vs. 7% for ≥30 years old subjects), 22.2% considered loss of urine embarrassing and humiliating (16% for <30 vs. 23% for ≥30 years old subjects) but only 6% revealed frustration and 2% was obliged to stay at home for long periods of time. Of the incontinent women 62.3% defined themselves anxious or nervous and 22.4% of these ascribed to anxiety or to nervousness an increase of urinary leakage (40% for <30 vs. 21% for ≥30 years old subjects), 9% reported to use antidepressive drugs, 85.5% had sexual intercourse and only 1.6% considered UI as an impediment to a satisfying sexual activity.

Conclusions

At present few studies describe patient perceptions regarding psychological, relational and sexual functions among young and middle aged women. Our results indicate that UI is a common problem in young women. Urge incontinence seems to be prevalent in < 30 aged women while stress incontinence occurs more frequently after this age. Finally we observed that UI did not prevent most women from carrying out the normal activities, social relationships and sexual activity even if there was a small group of women who did report a severe psychosocial impact.