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PELVIC FLOOR DYSFUNCTION AS REPORTED BY RECREATIONAL ATHLETES: PERSPECTIVES ON LIVING WITH SYMPTOMS, COMMENTS FROM A NATIONAL SURVEY

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Background

Pelvic floor disorders such as urinary incontinence, anal incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse are common(1, 2), affecting many women throughout their lives. Risk factors include childbirth, aging and obesity(3). Although participation in elite sport has also been reported to increase the prevalence of these symptoms(4), there is currently little literature regarding this in recreational exercisers. Our objectives therefore were to investigate the levels of pelvic floor dysfunction reported by recreational exercisers and in those who were sedentary, to identify potential correlations.

Method

This was a cross-sectional, national survey shared via social media. Data was collected on demographics, levels of exercise participation and pelvic floor symptoms, using validated questionnaires. Participants were also asked to comment freely on their experience of living with pelvic floor symptoms. Comments were transcribed and analysed thematically by two researchers. Recurring themes were categorised to identify any common issues.

Results

A high response rate (1599 women) was achieved. All levels of pelvic floor symptoms reported were high: urinary incontinence (70%), anal incontinence (52%) and pelvic organ prolapse (18%). No significant correlation was found between recreational exercise and symptoms. Only one third of women who reported symptoms had sought professional help. Comments were recorded by 537 participants. Many reported modifying their sports or stopping exercise altogether due to symptoms and reactions ranged from frustration and resignation to devastation that life had changed forever. The latter was particularly noted by some who, having sought help, believed professionals had implied these issues were trivial or should be considered 'normal'.

Conclusion

Many women reported pelvic floor symptoms in this survey. Most did not seek help yet, many reported negative effects on life and sport. Modifying or ceasing exercise left women feeling frustrated and distressed. Further research must investigate the barriers for women to seeking and finding help.

References

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