

Speakers: Aging does not have to mean discomfort

Getting older does not mean having to live with discomfort, health experts said at Tuesday's Lunch and Learn session at the Iola Public Library.

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Kailey Clark, OTR/L, and Rachel Stewart, COTA/L, offer pelvic floor therapy services at Allen County Regional Hospital.

Photo by Sarah Haney / Iola Register

While aging is inevitable, it doesn't have to be painful.

That was the message at Tuesday's Lunch and Learn at the Iola Public Library where health care providers urged women over 50 to challenge the idea that discomfort is "just part of aging."

Erin Splechter, RN and family nurse practitioner at Allen County Regional Hospital's Iola Clinic, opened the session by addressing the shift she's seen in how women approach their health.

"Women are becoming more vocal about their concerns," she said. "In the past, women assumed pain is just part of aging — and it's really not. There's a lot of different things we can do."

Occupational therapists Kailey Clark and Rachel Stewart, focused on pelvic floor therapy. Clark said many women are told that issues like bladder leakage or pelvic pain are simply part of getting older.

“It’s just really unfortunate that a lot of times that’s kind of what it’s referred to,” she said.

Clark explained that the pelvic floor is a group of muscles at the base of the pelvis that support bladder, bowel, and sexual function, as well as core stability. Problems with these muscles can cause issues like incontinence, constipation, and even back pain.

Pelvic floor therapy is becoming an increasingly popular solution to these problems.

Stewart described what pelvic floor therapy entails, with the first few visits focused on relaxation.

“It’s not just about doing Kegel exercises. It’s also learning how to breathe. A lot of the time, your pelvic floor dysfunctions are related to stress or tension and we’re trying to decrease that.”

Stewart said sessions often include habit and behavioral changes, such as identifying bladder irritants like sugars, caffeine, carbonated drinks, and citrus.

“Basically, everything in moderation if you have symptoms is a good goal,” Clark said. “But we also want you to live and enjoy the things that you want.”

Over time, therapy focuses on posture, diet and stress management.

Clark also addressed some common myths, including that only women need pelvic floor therapy. “Even though we’re a room full of women, men also have a pelvic floor,” Clark said. “It’s not just for the older generation, either.”

THERAPY SESSIONS also cover relaxation techniques and strategies, such as deep diaphragmatic breathing and gentle pressure on the perineum to ease the sudden urge to urinate.

Clark added that it is beneficial to take deep breaths throughout the day and stay hydrated. She noted that pelvic floor therapy requires a referral, which can come from a primary care provider, gynecologist, or urologist. Treatment typically involves weekly sessions for eight to 12 weeks and it is covered by Medicare. “Most insurance plans also cover therapy services,” she added. “It’s cheaper to do this than to get a bladder sling or have surgery.”



Erin Splechter, RN, FNP, discusses health screenings and vaccinations women should keep up with after age 50.
Photo by Sarah Haney / Iola Register

SPLECHTER outlined the key health screenings and vaccinations women should keep up with after age 50, including mammograms, bone density scans, and colon cancer tests.

Checking estrogen levels is also important.

“When you hit menopause, your body stops naturally producing estrogen,” she explained. “Estrogen is one of those things that helps build your bone strength. When we lack it, we’re at a higher risk for osteoporosis.”

MEDICARE typically covers bone density scans every two years after 65, but Splechter noted that younger women with risk factors — such as surgical menopause or previous fractures — should talk to their provider about earlier testing. She also discussed heart health screenings like the CardioScan, now available in both Iola and Garnett. “It looks at the calcium buildup and the hardening of your arteries, specifically of your heart,” she said. Though insurance doesn’t cover the scan, she noted the \$60 test is a good way to tell you if you’re at a higher risk and maybe need a little bit more investigation from a cardiologist.

Vaccinations are another key part of aging well. Splechter encouraged staying current on annual flu shots and keeping up to date with pneumonia, shingles, and tetanus vaccines. She also noted that whooping cough has made a return due to declining immunization rates and recommended an updated Tdap for those with new grandchildren.

Lifestyle habits also play a crucial role in healthy aging. “Regular exercise helps the heart and the bones,” Splechter said, recommending 150 minutes of moderate activity per week.

She also stressed the importance of nutrition, adequate sleep, and social connection.

“Maintaining social connections can help with your depression,” she added, noting that shorter daylight hours and the holidays can heighten stress and sadness for many.

TUESDAY’S event was part of Allen County Regional Hospital’s ongoing Lunch and Learn series, which offers free educational programs to the community on a variety of health and wellness topics.