

# “ HEY DOC, CAN YOU KEEP

A SECRET

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*Your  
embarrassing  
health  
questions,  
answered*

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BY DANA SULLIVAN

**b**othersome bladder problems, alarming odors, hair growing in all the wrong places. We all have issues that we're too embarrassed to bring up with anyone—including our doctors. But rest assured, your doc has heard it all before. "It's our job to help you, not judge you," says Laura Dean, MD, a spokeswoman for the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists who practices in Stillwater, Minnesota. Still, inquiring about a delicate health problem can be uncomfortable. That's why we decided to start the conversation for you by asking experts to address six common blush-worthy complaints. PLEASE TURN TO 136

# Q

*Sometimes I pee a little when I laugh or run, but I don't want to take medication. Should I even bother mentioning this to my doctor?*



**A** Absolutely, says ob-gyn Lissa Rankin, MD, author of *What's Up Down There?* And in fact, medication doesn't work for stress incontinence, which is what you're describing. Stress incontinence—the most common form of incontinence in women, as it often

occurs post-pregnancy when the muscles and connective tissue around the bladder and urethra weaken or stretch out—is prompted by laughing, coughing, exercise or other physical exertion. (Increased or sudden pressure on the bladder forces urine out.)

One of the best fixes is Kegel exercises, which involve squeezing your pelvic floor muscles to strengthen them. Your doctor can explain how to do the exercises properly, or you can go to [mayoclinic.com/health/kegel-exercises/WO00119](http://mayoclinic.com/health/kegel-exercises/WO00119) for step-by-step instructions. Some women also benefit from “timed voiding,” which means emptying your bladder on a regular schedule, such as every hour. The less full your bladder is, the less likely you are to leak.

Sometimes the problem is caused by prolapse (when your bladder has fallen out of place a little, which your gynecologist can detect). In that case, a device called a pessary can help. You can wear it all the time or just put it in when you think you'll need it—like when you plan to go running—and it will push your bladder back into its proper place.



**A** It's normal to lose up to 100 hairs a day at any age. But the sad truth is that women's hair (like men's) may naturally get thinner with age. And some women do experience female-pattern hair loss—the top and front of the head is most affected. (It can start as early as your 30s, but it may worsen around menopause.) Still, you should definitely raise this issue with your doctor, especially if you're starting to see bald spots or your hair is coming out in clumps. “There are many reasons for hair loss, including stress, thyroid conditions and infections,” says Sonia Badreshia-Bansal, MD, a member of the American Academy of Dermatology and a clinical instructor of dermatology at the University

of California, San Francisco. Numerous medications, including antidepressants, birth control and blood

# Q

*I'm losing my hair. Could I be going bald?*

pressure drugs, can also cause hair loss. Hormonal changes (for example, if you've recently given birth or stopped taking birth control pills) can cause your hair to thin as well, but once your hormones stabilize, your hair

should return to normal in about six months.

Dieting can cause your hair to thin, especially if you're not getting enough protein, iron and B vitamins, as they are essential for healthy hair. Dr. Badreshia-Bansal sometimes recommends a biotin (B vitamin) supplement.

If your doctor determines that so-called “normal” female-pattern hair loss is to blame, she'll probably recommend over-the-counter minoxidil (Rogaine), a topical solution that slows down hair loss and stimulates new strands. She may also prescribe spironolactone (Aldactone), an oral medication that blocks the hormone receptors that cause hair loss. PLEASE TURN TO 138

# Q

*I'm never in the mood for sex. Is this just a normal part of aging?*



**A** No. “It's a myth that sex drive peaks at a certain age,” says Joy Davidson, PhD, a psychologist, certified sex therapist and author of *Fearless Sex*. That said, it is true that hormonal fluctuations that occur around menopause can lead to vaginal dryness and discomfort, which in turn can cause your sex drive to take a nosedive. If that's the case, ask your doctor to prescribe an estrogen cream or pill or a vaginal ring containing estrogen, which should restore some moisture and make you more comfortable, says Dr. Dean. Or try Zestra, an over-the-counter topical oil that has been through clinical testing, says Dr. Davidson, who explains that it can increase sensation. Zestra may also help if you're taking a medication (such as an antidepressant) that causes sexual side effects.

But much of the time, physical issues aren't to blame. There are so many reasons that sex drive could temporarily wane, ranging from job-related stress to relationship problems and plain old fatigue. Improving your sex life usually means addressing the underlying problem. If you can't sort it out on your own, consider consulting a sex therapist (alone or with your partner). To find one who's certified by the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors & Therapists, go to [aasect.org/directory.asp](http://aasect.org/directory.asp).

