

Levator Syndrome

What is levator syndrome?

Levator syndrome is a condition caused by spasms of the levator muscles, which are large muscles in the lower pelvis which surround the rectum, urethra and vagina. These muscles help form the pelvic floor and support and encircle the lower pelvic organs. Levator syndrome includes other named conditions such as proctalgia fugax, anismus, non-relaxing puborectalis, and chronic pelvic pain syndrome.

What are the symptoms of levator syndrome?

Patients usually experience either dull, aching pain, particularly after prolonged sitting, or sudden sharp pains. Others have the sensation of having a ball or object stuck in their rectum. Patients may have dull, mild constant pain or brief, sharp pains lasting only a few seconds (proctalgia fugax). These pains can occur suddenly and awaken one from sleep. For unknown reasons, the pain is often felt more on the left side of the body. In some patients the abnormal sensations may involve the genital organs as well. In some cases, patients may have little pain but have significant problems in passing stool because their outlet muscles don't relax during defecation.

Why do people get levator syndrome?

The causes of levator syndrome are not well understood. Tension and stress are often important underlying factors. Sleep deprivation and night shift work may also contribute. Poor posture and lack of exercise are also contributors in some cases. In most patients, the exact cause is unknown.

How is levator syndrome diagnosed?

Levator syndrome is often a diagnosis of exclusion, meaning that other causes of pelvic pain are ruled out first. The symptoms described above are usually highly predictive of this condition and, most importantly, the muscle is tender and tense when examined by a doctor. The tenderness on examination is usually in the tailbone area and/or on either side of the rectum. Palpation of these muscles often reproduces the patients' pain. In levator syndrome, unlike other painful anorectal conditions, bowel movements often make the pain better.

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What can be done to treat this condition?

The first step in treatment of levator syndrome is making a correct diagnosis. This involves a thorough history and physical exam and ruling out other painful anorectal conditions. Establishing a correct diagnosis of levator syndrome is very important as it provides the patient an explanation for their symptoms, and helps to break the vicious cycle of worry, stress, muscle spasm, and increasing pain. Levator syndrome is benign and ultimately cannot harm a patient. It is bothersome and painful but not dangerous.

What treatments are available?

Any treatment which relieves stress and muscle spasm can be effective. Stretching, exercise, stress relief, hot baths, and normalization of sleep routine all tend to be helpful. In persistent cases, referral to outpatient physical therapy is usually recommended.

Other potentially helpful treatments include biofeedback and acupuncture. If no relief is obtained from the treatments mentioned above, another alternative is to massage the muscle very vigorously in the operating room, using a brief anesthetic.

This is sometimes combined with injection of botulinum toxin, which is sometimes effective in paralyzing the levator muscle for up to six months, allowing relief of pain. Patients leave the hospital an hour or two after completing this treatment, and do not need to stay overnight in the hospital. This treatment is necessary only in the most difficult cases, and is often successful in eliminating the aching.

Medications are rarely helpful. The so-called “muscle relaxants” do not, in fact, relax the muscles, but only give temporary relief from anxiety; they are not useful in achieving a long-term solution to this problem. Opiate pain medicines are usually harmful and detrimental in this condition as they produce constipation, drug tolerance, and potential addiction issues while not treating the underlying causes of the muscle spasm and discomfort.

Once my symptoms improve, will they come back?

As levator syndrome is often a manifestation of increased life stress, (similar to conditions such as migraine headaches) there is a tendency for this condition to re-occur at various times throughout life. However, once a patient has the correct diagnosis of levator syndrome, and knows strategies to deal with the problem, symptoms will often improve and decrease with age.