



Breaking the Silence on Stress Urinary Incontinence: Advances, Controversies, and the Road Ahead

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Citation this Article: Dr. Shweta Rao, Dr. R.B Nerli, Dr. Vishal Kadeli, “Breaking the Silence on Stress Urinary Incontinence: Advances, Controversies, and the Road Ahead”, IJMSIR - August – 2025, Vol – 10, Issue - 4, P. No. 119 – 127.

Type of Publication: Original Research Article

Conflicts of Interest: Nil

Introduction

Stress urinary incontinence (SUI) is one of the most common types of urinary incontinence affecting women globally. It is characterized by the involuntary leakage of urine during activities that increase intra-abdominal pressure, such as coughing, sneezing, laughing, or physical exertion. Unlike urge incontinence, which is associated with a strong and sudden desire to void, SUI is linked to mechanical failure of the urethral closure mechanism. Although not life-threatening, SUI can lead to significant emotional distress, reduced quality of life, and social embarrassment. The multifactorial nature of SUI—including anatomical, physiological, hormonal, and neuromuscular components—complicates both its diagnosis and management.

Despite the prevalence of SUI, it remains underreported and undertreated due to stigma, embarrassment, and the misconception that it is a normal part of aging or childbirth. A clear understanding of its pathophysiology, risk factors, diagnostic tools, and management strategies is essential for providing effective care and improving patient outcomes. This review provides a comprehensive,

updated analysis of SUI, drawing on recent clinical and scientific literature to highlight its complexity and the need for individualized treatment approaches.

Epidemiology

The global prevalence of stress urinary incontinence varies depending on definitions used, diagnostic methods, and population demographics. Estimates suggest that between 15% and 35% of adult women experience SUI at some point in their lives, with higher rates observed among women over 40 years of age. In a large U.S. national survey, the prevalence of any urinary incontinence was over 40% among women, with stress incontinence being the most commonly reported subtype.²

Age, parity, and mode of delivery are among the most significant risk factors for SUI. Vaginal delivery, particularly when associated with prolonged second stage of labor or the use of forceps, is known to increase the risk of pelvic floor trauma, including injury to the levator ani muscle and pudendal nerve. In addition, menopause and declining estrogen levels contribute to atrophy of the

urogenital epithelium and weakening of connective tissue, further predisposing women to SUI.

Other risk factors include obesity, chronic respiratory conditions that cause frequent coughing, connective tissue disorders, heavy lifting, and prior pelvic surgeries. Genetics also plays a role, with studies showing increased concordance of SUI among monozygotic twins. Understanding the multifaceted nature of SUI epidemiology is essential in tailoring prevention and early intervention strategies.

Etiopathogenesis of Stress Urinary Incontinence

Stress urinary incontinence (SUI) arises from complex interactions among anatomical support structures, neuromuscular control, and urethral sphincter function. The continence mechanism depends on several key components, including adequate support of the bladder neck and proximal urethra, proper functioning of the urethral sphincter, and the integrity of the pelvic floor muscles.

1. Urethral Sphincter Insufficiency

Intrinsic sphincter deficiency (ISD) refers to the failure of the urethral sphincter to maintain a watertight seal, especially under stress. This condition is often reflected in decreased maximum urethral closure pressure (MUCP) on urodynamic studies. ISD may result from degeneration of the sphincteric smooth and striated muscle fibers, reduction in vascular supply, and neuropathic changes affecting the pudendal nerve.³

2. Urethral Hypermobility and Support Failure

Urethral hypermobility typically results from weakness or damage to the supportive structures of the urethra and bladder neck, including the endopelvic fascia, pubocervical ligaments, and levator ani muscles. During intra-abdominal pressure increases, the urethra fails to close effectively due to its altered position and loss of

support. This is commonly seen after childbirth, especially with multiple or traumatic vaginal deliveries.

3. Pelvic Floor Muscle Dysfunction

The pelvic floor muscles, particularly the pubococcygeus and iliococcygeus, provide critical support to pelvic organs and help maintain continence. Childbirth-related trauma can result in muscle avulsion or weakening. Additionally, neuromuscular injury may impair voluntary muscle contractions. Dysfunction of these muscles often coexists with fascial weakness, exacerbating SUI.

4. Neurological Contributions

Nerve injury, particularly involving the pudendal nerve, can lead to denervation of both the pelvic floor and urethral sphincter. Electromyographic studies in women with SUI often show prolonged motor unit potentials, consistent with chronic denervation and compensatory reinnervation. Chronic strain or aging may further contribute to subclinical nerve damage.

5. Connective Tissue and Hormonal Influences

Estrogen is essential for maintaining the trophic health of urogenital tissues. Postmenopausal estrogen decline leads to thinning of the urethral epithelium, reduced vascularity, and diminished collagen content. Additionally, genetic factors and connective tissue disorders may predispose certain women to pelvic organ prolapse and stress incontinence.

Table 1: Risk Factors for Stress Urinary Incontinence

Category	Risk Factor	Explanation
Obstetric	Vaginal delivery, especially with forceps or prolonged second stage	Leads to pelvic floor trauma and nerve injury
Age-related	Advancing age	Reduced muscle tone, estrogen deficiency, and nerve conduction decline
Hormonal	Menopause and low estrogen levels	Urogenital atrophy and reduced urethral coaptation
Lifestyle	Obesity, smoking, heavy lifting	Increases intra-abdominal pressure and weakens connective tissue
Medical Conditions	Chronic cough, diabetes, neurological disorders	Straining, neuropathy, or impaired muscle control
Genetic/Connective Tissue	Family history, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome	Weak collagen structure or impaired tissue repair
Iatrogenic	Pelvic or urological surgeries	May damage sphincter or support structures

Diagnosis of Stress Urinary Incontinence

The accurate diagnosis of stress urinary incontinence is essential to differentiate it from other types of urinary incontinence and to guide appropriate treatment. Diagnosis typically involves a combination of clinical history, physical examination, and specialized investigations.

Clinical History

A thorough history is the cornerstone of diagnosis. Patients often report involuntary urine leakage during coughing, sneezing, laughing, running, or lifting heavy objects. Important aspects to explore include:

- Onset, frequency, and volume of leakage
- Situational triggers (e.g., exercise, laughing)
- Impact on daily life and emotional well-being
- Obstetric history (number and type of deliveries)
- Menopausal status and hormone therapy use
- Previous pelvic or urological surgeries
- History of neurological disorders

Validated questionnaires, such as the International Consultation on Incontinence Questionnaire (ICIQ-SF),

can be useful in assessing symptom severity and monitoring treatment outcomes.

Physical Examination

The pelvic examination is crucial to assess the structural and functional integrity of the pelvic floor and urethra.

Key components include:

- Inspection of the perineum for signs of atrophy, scarring, or prolapse
- Cough stress test: observing for urine leakage when the patient coughs with a full bladder
- Assessment of urethral mobility via the Q-tip test (angle of displacement >30° suggests hypermobility)
- Evaluation of pelvic organ support using the POP-Q (Pelvic Organ Prolapse Quantification) system
- Digital assessment of levator ani muscle strength

Voiding Diary and Pad Test

A 3-day bladder diary is often recommended to document fluid intake, voiding frequency, urgency episodes, and incontinence events. A 1-hour or 24-hour pad test may be used to quantify the volume of urine loss

objectively. These tools are particularly helpful in research and pre/post-treatment evaluations.

Urodynamic Testing

Urodynamic studies (UDS) are used when the diagnosis is unclear, or when surgical intervention is being considered.⁴ They help differentiate SUI from urge or mixed incontinence and assess bladder compliance, capacity, and detrusor overactivity. Components include:

- **Uroflowmetry:** Evaluates flow rate and pattern
- **Filling cystometry:** Measures detrusor activity during bladder filling
- **Pressure-flow studies:** Assess voiding phase dynamics
- **Valsalva leak point pressure (VLPP) and abdominal leak point pressure (ALPP):** Estimate urethral function

Although UDS can provide useful data, some studies have questioned its routine use before surgery in women with clearly demonstrable SUI.

Imaging

Pelvic floor imaging, especially with dynamic ultrasound or MRI, is increasingly used to evaluate anatomical factors contributing to incontinence. Findings may include:

- Bladder neck descent during straining
- Urethral funneling at rest or with effort
- Levator ani muscle defects or avulsion
- Rectocele, cystocele, or enterocele contributing to symptoms

Trans-perineal ultrasound is a practical and non-invasive tool in many clinical settings, while MRI offers more detailed soft tissue resolution and is useful in complex cases.

Electrophysiological Testing

Electromyography (EMG) may be used in selected cases to assess neuromuscular function of the pelvic floor. This

is more relevant in cases where neurogenic factors are suspected, such as patients with a history of pelvic surgery, spinal cord injury, or chronic neurologic disease.

Types and Classification of Stress Urinary Incontinence

Stress urinary incontinence (SUI) is not a uniform condition; rather, it encompasses a spectrum of presentations influenced by anatomical, functional, and neurological variations. Classification systems help in understanding the underlying pathophysiology and in tailoring treatment strategies.

Based on Urodynamic Findings

SUI is commonly classified according to findings on urodynamic studies:

- **Urethral Hypermobility:** Most common form of SUI. Characterized by excessive downward movement of the urethra and bladder neck during increases in intra-abdominal pressure, often due to weakness of the pelvic floor and supportive structures. Leak point pressure is usually normal or mildly reduced.
- **Intrinsic Sphincter Deficiency (ISD):** Defined as a failure of the urethral sphincter mechanism to coapt and maintain a watertight seal. It is often associated with low maximum urethral closure pressure (MUCP) and low Valsalva leak point pressure (VLPP <60 cm H₂O). This form is more severe and less responsive to conservative therapy.^{5,6}
- **Mixed Type:** In some cases, patients exhibit both urethral hypermobility and ISD. Management of mixed cases may require multimodal approaches and often shows variable response to conventional treatments.

Clinical Classification

Another practical approach is classifying SUI based on clinical history and presentation:

- **Mild SUI:** Leakage occurs only during vigorous exertion (e.g., heavy lifting, running) and is often infrequent.
- **Moderate SUI:** Leakage occurs during daily activities such as walking, climbing stairs, or lifting light objects.
- **Severe SUI:** Leakage happens even with minimal exertion, standing, or without warning. It may be accompanied by urgency in some cases.

This classification is useful for selecting conservative vs. surgical management and for evaluating treatment efficacy.^{7,8}

Based on Etiology

Etiologic classification is helpful in identifying underlying causes, particularly in complex cases:

- **Obstetric-related SUI:** Results from pelvic floor trauma during childbirth, including levator ani avulsion, nerve injury, or fascial tears.⁹
- **Iatrogenic SUI:** Caused by prior pelvic surgeries, such as hysterectomy, or bladder neck surgeries leading to sphincter incompetence.
- **Postmenopausal or Hormonal SUI:** Due to estrogen deficiency, leading to urogenital atrophy and reduced urethral tone.
- **Neurogenic SUI:** Associated with neurologic conditions such as multiple sclerosis, diabetic neuropathy, or spinal cord injuries, resulting in impaired sphincter control.

Anatomical Classification (DeLancey's Levels of Support)

Dr. John DeLancey proposed a classification of pelvic support levels that help explain pelvic floor dysfunction:

- **Level I:** Apical support (uterosacral and cardinal ligaments)
- **Level II:** Mid-vaginal support (pubocervical fascia, arcus tendineus)

- **Level III:** Distal urethral and perineal support (perineal body, superficial perineal muscles)

Stress incontinence is most commonly linked to Level II and Level III defects, particularly involving fascial and muscular structures that support the urethra and bladder neck.¹

Management of Stress Urinary Incontinence

The management of stress urinary incontinence (SUI) should be individualized, taking into account the severity of symptoms, underlying etiology, patient preferences, comorbidities, and impact on quality of life. Treatment strategies range from conservative behavioral approaches to surgical interventions.

Lifestyle Modifications and Behavioral Therapy

Initial management typically includes lifestyle changes aimed at reducing intra-abdominal pressure and improving pelvic support.

- **Weight Loss:** Even a modest reduction in body weight (5–10%) has been shown to significantly improve SUI symptoms, especially in overweight or obese women.
- **Bladder Training:** Though more effective for urge incontinence, scheduled voiding can reduce urgency symptoms in patients with mixed UI.
- **Fluid Management:** Reducing caffeine and alcohol intake, along with timed voiding, can minimize triggering factors.
- **Smoking Cessation:** Smoking contributes to chronic coughing and weakens connective tissue, exacerbating incontinence.

Pelvic Floor Muscle Training (PFMT)

Pelvic floor muscle exercises (Kegel exercises) are a first-line, evidence-based intervention for mild to moderate SUI.

- **Mechanism:** Strengthens the pubococcygeus and associated muscles to support the urethra and prevent descent during stress.
- **Supervised vs. Self-Guided:** Supervised PFMT, often with biofeedback, results in greater improvement than unsupervised regimens.
- **Duration:** Regular practice for at least 3–6 months is recommended before assessing efficacy.

Vaginal Devices and Pessaries

For women who are not candidates for surgery or prefer non-invasive options, intravaginal support devices offer symptom relief.

- **Pessaries:** Support the bladder neck and increase urethral resistance during exertion. Can be self-inserted or fitted by a provider.
- **Urethral Inserts:** Small, disposable devices inserted into the urethra to block leakage temporarily during activities like exercise.

Pharmacotherapy

Although limited, pharmacologic options may be considered in selected patients:

- **Duloxetine:** A serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor (SNRI) approved in some countries for SUI. It increases urethral sphincter tone by enhancing pudendal nerve activity. Side effects include nausea, dizziness, and fatigue.
- **Topical Estrogen:** Useful in postmenopausal women with atrophic urogenital mucosa. Improves tissue tone and vascularity when applied locally, although systemic estrogen has not shown consistent benefit.

5. Minimally Invasive Procedures

These are indicated for women who do not respond to conservative therapy and desire a durable solution:

a. Bulking Agents

- Injectable materials (e.g., collagen, carbon-coated beads, or polyacrylamide gel) are delivered periurethrally to coapt the urethral walls.
- Suitable for ISD or women unwilling to undergo surgery.
- Effect tends to wane over time, requiring repeat injections.

b. Laser Therapy (Emerging)

- Fractional CO₂ or erbium:YAG lasers are being explored for their ability to remodel collagen and improve urethral and vaginal tissue tone.
- Evidence is still limited and long-term efficacy remains unclear.¹⁵

Surgical Interventions

Surgery remains the gold standard for moderate to severe SUI and for women with significant anatomical defects or intrinsic sphincter deficiency.¹⁰

a. Mid-Urethral Sling (MUS) Procedures

- The most commonly performed surgery for SUI.
- Synthetic polypropylene mesh is used to support the mid-urethra.
- Two main types: retropubic (TVT) and transobturator (TOT) routes.¹²
- High long-term success rates (80–90%) with minimally invasive approach.

b. Autologous Fascial Sling

- Uses the patient's rectus fascia to create a sling beneath the urethra.
- Preferred in patients with mesh contraindications or prior mesh complications.

c. Burch Colposuspension

- Laparoscopic or open technique anchoring the bladder neck to Cooper's ligament.
- Effective, especially in cases with significant urethral hypermobility.¹³

d. Artificial Urinary Sphincter (AUS)

- Reserved for women with severe ISD or recurrent SUI after failed sling procedures.
- Involves implantation of a fluid-filled cuff around the urethra with a control pump in the labia.

Postoperative Considerations

- **Complications:** Include urinary retention, mesh exposure, infection, and bladder perforation.¹¹
- **Follow-up:** Regular evaluation of continence status, voiding function, and quality of life using standardized tools like ICIQ-SF.

Table 2: Comparison of Management Options for Stress Urinary Incontinence

Management Approach	Mechanism	Indications	Limitations
Pelvic Floor Muscle Training (PFMT)	Strengthens pelvic floor support around urethra	Mild to moderate SUI, postpartum, elderly	Requires motivation and consistency
Mid-Urethral Sling Surgery	Provides mechanical support to mid-urethra	Moderate to severe SUI with urethral hypermobility	Mesh complications, rare erosion
Bulking Agents	Narrows urethral lumen by tissue coaptation	Intrinsic sphincter deficiency, elderly	Temporary effect, needs reinjection
Pessary Use	Supports bladder neck and pelvic organs	Non-surgical candidates, temporary relief	Discomfort, requires fitting and maintenance
Duloxetine	Increases urethral sphincter tone via neuromodulation	Mild SUI, often adjunctive	Side effects like nausea and dizziness

Recent Advances, Controversies, and Future Directions

The management and understanding of stress urinary incontinence (SUI) continue to evolve with advancements in surgical techniques, imaging, and molecular research. At the same time, certain controversies persist—particularly around the use of synthetic mesh and the utility of routine urodynamics.

Advances in Imaging and Diagnostics

- **Dynamic Ultrasound and MRI** now allow for high-resolution visualization of pelvic floor structures. These tools can identify levator ani defects, urethral mobility, and mesh position postoperatively.
- **Shear-wave elastography**, an emerging ultrasound-based technique, is being investigated to quantify tissue stiffness in the pelvic floor and urethra, potentially aiding early diagnosis.

Surgical Innovations

- **Single-incision mini-slings (SIMS)** offer reduced operative time, less postoperative pain, and comparable outcomes to traditional mid-urethral slings, especially in low-risk women.
- **Robot-assisted Burch colposuspension** is gaining interest for complex or recurrent cases, combining precision with minimally invasive benefits.

Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Therapy

- Autologous stem cells derived from adipose or muscle tissue have shown promise in regenerating urethral sphincter function in early clinical trials.
- Research is ongoing to develop bioengineered scaffolds that mimic the extracellular matrix and promote tissue repair.¹³

Controversies

- **Mesh-Related Complications:** Mid-urethral slings, once hailed as the gold standard, have come under

scrutiny due to mesh erosion, chronic pelvic pain, and lawsuits in various countries. Regulatory bodies now require detailed counseling and long-term follow-up.¹⁴

- **Role of Urodynamics:** While valuable in complex cases, large randomized trials have questioned the necessity of routine pre-operative urodynamics in women with demonstrable SUI. Clinical assessment may suffice in straightforward cases.

Future Directions

- Personalized medicine approaches that incorporate genetic markers, pelvic floor biomechanics, and microbiome analysis could revolutionize diagnosis and therapy.
- The integration of mobile health (mHealth) tools, such as continence apps and remote pelvic floor therapy via telemedicine, is making SUI management more accessible.
- Artificial intelligence (AI) models are being explored to predict surgical outcomes and personalize treatment strategies.¹⁶

Conclusion

Stress urinary incontinence is a common yet complex disorder that significantly affects women's physical, emotional, and social well-being. Its etiology involves an intricate interplay of anatomical, functional, and hormonal factors. While conservative therapies remain the first line of treatment, a variety of surgical options provide long-term relief in selected patients.

With evolving imaging techniques, surgical innovations, and regenerative therapies on the horizon, the future of SUI management appears promising. However, ongoing controversies—especially around mesh use and diagnostic pathways—highlight the need for individualized, evidence-based care. A multidisciplinary approach involving urologists, gynaecologists,

physiotherapists, and primary care providers is essential to achieve optimal outcomes for women affected by this condition.

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