

Advances in Women's Health

Reclaiming Your Body

A rectocele is a defect in the shape of the vagina, which is caused by a detachment of the rectovaginal septum (RV septum). The RV septum acts as a bridge of tissue between the vagina and the rectum, providing support and stability. The defect can occur from the detachment of the RV septum at the entrance of the vagina, the sidewalls of the vagina, or the top of the vagina behind the cervix. The defect makes the vagina feel expanded and loose and is often referred to as vaginal pressure.

A rectocele can cause a variety of symptoms, which symptoms are often misunderstood or attributed to other conditions. They include worsening constipation since giving birth, or the requirement of an increase fiber in the diet, use of stool softeners, or change in positions to have a bowel movement. When the RV septum detaches from the back of the vagina, the small intestines and a part of the rectum can bulge into the affected part of the vagina, causing a change in bowel habits and making it difficult to defecate spontaneously. A rectocele can also cause reduced sexual pleasure, believed to be most commonly due to an increase in the size or shape of the vagina, a change in the angle of the vagina, or disrupted muscles at the opening of the vagina. A rectocele can also cause the expulsion of air from the vagina during sexual intercourse. Some women, but not all, complain of intermittent, lower back pain.

Many women slowly and unconsciously accept these symptoms as normal. Mothers, aunts, and grandmothers often refer to them as “natural events”. In reality, the defect is caused by “natural tears”, most often occurring as a result of childbirth. Tears can occur during childbirth for many reasons, such as, giving birth to large babies, difficult or long labors, the use of instrumentation such as forceps, episiotomies, or unrecognized tears deep in the pelvis, which damage the nerve supply. Unfortunately, even delivery by C-section (with or without labor) can cause damage to the RV septum. Other predisposing factors can include obesity, poor nutrition, smoking, chronic cough, constipation, heavy lifting or having genetically poor tissue strength.

The surgical procedure to correct these two defects is called a “site specific repair”. The repair requires the reattachment of the RV septum to close the enterocele (hernia behind the cervix and vagina). The repair of the hernia will alleviate the constipation and lower backache, if present, and will also restore the shape, size, and angle of the vagina. The last step of the procedure is to reattach the RV septum to the tissues at the opening of the vagina called the perineal body between the anus and the vaginal opening. This helps enhance sexual pleasure for the woman and allows the penis more direct contact with the “G-spot”, since the correct angle of the penile penetration is restored. Additionally, since the repair procedure restores the muscular structure of the vagina, a woman’s male partner receives more stimulation to his penis. The process can bring heightened sexual pleasure to both partners. And although sexual pleasure is multi-factorial (for example, relationship issues, etc.), restoration of the anatomy does help restore normal function. A thorough, painless pelvic examination by your gynecologist can reveal these defects. I suggest a woman take a proactive position, and discuss their symptoms or concerns with their gynecologist. If these concerns are not resolved, a second opinion is warranted. These defects are medical conditions covered by health insurance and are often done in a day surgery, so that the patient can go home a few hours after surgery. The recovery time usually takes about a week, with resumption of sexual intercourse between three to six weeks (depending on the situation). This condition is a quality of life issue. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms; there is help for you.