HEALTH

The Truth about Women And Chronic Pain

(NU) - An estimated 50 million Americans suffer from at least one form of pain, and too often, healthcare professionals cannot give a reason or solution for their symptoms. The pain some women experience can be so debilitating, it can even make sitting a hardship.

About 14 million women will develop a chronic pain disorder called vulvodynia in their lifetime. It is the recurring discomfort to the vulva (area surrounding the vaginal opening). Like many other chronic pain disorders, vulvodynia is misunderstood, because, many times, there are no visible signs of the condition, which can make it difficult for healthcare providers to diagnose. Women are often told that their pain “is all in their head.” As a result, many women suffer in embarrassing silence, while others who seek medical care cannot get a proper diagnosis.

Once thought to affect primarily Caucasian women, recent studies indicate that African American and Hispanic women are just as likely to develop vulvodynia.

A Harvard University study found that 60 percent of vulvodynia sufferers consulted at least three doctors for diagnosis. These results demonstrate just how critical it is to be persistent in seeking medical care for vulvodynia and the importance of being your own advocate.

The cause of vulvodynia is still unclear to health care professionals. Vulvodynia is not caused by cancer, infections or sexually transmitted diseases. The most common symptoms of vulvodynia are burning, stinging, irritation and pain. These symptoms can be constant, or they may come and go. If chronic pain is left untreated, problems can continue for months or years with no resolution.

There is no single specific treatment plan that works for every woman with chronic pain. Experts often recommend an individualized plan that includes a combination of treatments. To get an accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment, women suffering from vulvodynia and other types of chronic pain should learn as much as they can about the condition.

For more information on vulvodynia and local support groups contact the National Vulvodynia Association (www.nva.org). The NVA’s resources can help women with vulvodynia better understand the condition and improve their ability to discuss it with their healthcare professional.

Women should be involved in their own treatment plan, and advocate for the care they need. To learn more about how to take action and advocate for your right to necessary care, visit www.inthefaceofpain.com. In The Face of Pain is an online advocacy resource provided by Purdue Pharma L.P.