

Erectile dysfunction

What is erectile dysfunction?

Erectile dysfunction (ED) is when a man is unable to get or keep an erection that is adequate for satisfactory sexual intercourse. Erectile dysfunction is fairly common and can affect quality of life, confidence and self-esteem, as well as contributing to relationship difficulties. ED can be treated, so if you are affected, talk to your doctor so that the reason for the ED can be assessed and you can receive help.

Is ED common?

Many men have erection problems at times. These problems may be temporary and related to psychological and lifestyle issues (eg, stress, too much alcohol, performance anxiety). ED does become more common as men get older. About 4 in 10 men over 40 will have erection problems. Sometimes, the problems are more persistent and related to underlying physical and/or psychological reasons.

What causes ED?

Getting an erection involves co-ordination of nerves, blood vessels and hormone pathways for the blood vessels of the penis to relax and widen, to fill with blood and make the penis hard and erect. ED can be caused by both physical and psychological factors.

Physical reasons

Physical factors include problems with the blood vessels or nerves of the penis, hormonal problems or problems with the structure of the penis.

Neurological problems such as Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, Multiple Sclerosis, nerve problems related to diabetes, and spinal cord injury can also be associated with ED.

Many other medical issues can affect nerves and blood flow too. Other things that can affect blood flow to the penis:

- Too much alcohol
- Smoking
- Having too much cholesterol in the blood
- Lack of regular exercise
- Bicycle riding more than 3 hours per week.
- Some medicines to treat heart failure, high blood pressure, or depression. If you are taking these sorts of medicines and have ED, talk to your GP. There may be other medicines you can take.



Psychological reasons

Sometimes worries can cause ED, for example:

- Attitudes about sex
- Stress, guilt, depression, or tiredness
- Feeling anxious about your sexual performance
- Relationship problems.

ED may be caused by psychological conditions such as depression or schizophrenia. Medications used to treat these conditions can also cause ED.

If you are able to have an erection at other times such as when you wake up, then your ED is more likely to be caused by a psychological reason than a physical one.

Tip: Talk to your doctor if you feel you may be affected by depression. These websites may help with depression or stress, www.depression.org.nz, www.calm.auckland.ac.nz

Need help?

Most men affected by ED manage to get erections with more stimulation. If you are partnered, you and your partner can talk about how important sex is to your relationship. There are other ways people can be loving towards each other, and not all couples need an active sex life to have a good relationship.

A healthy lifestyle can help to improve erections. Drinking less alcohol, stopping smoking, being more active and reducing stress can all help.

Getting help from your GP

Many men are unhappy with their ability to get or keep an erection, but only 1 out of 20 of these men ask for help. Generally, men don't like talking about their sex life, even when it is going well. You may feel more comfortable talking to your GP if you understand that there may be a physical reason for your ED. Remember all conversations with your GP are confidential.

It is important that any physical causes for ED are identified. Sometimes ED can be a sign that there is a health issue that needs addressing such as heart health (cardiovascular risk) or diabetes.

Your GP can help you in a number of ways. Your GP can check your health and any current medicines. If your ED has a physical cause, your GP can explain what can help and suggest a treatment that is right for you. If stress or depression/anxiety are causing your ED, your doctor can assist you to get the help you need.

What your GP might do:

- Examine your penis, testicles and prostate gland
- Check your blood pressure, heart rate, waist circumference and weight/height
- Review your medicines for side effects
- Check for signs of peripheral vascular disease, diabetes or hormone problems
- Order blood or urine tests to check for diabetes and high cholesterol, make sure your liver and kidneys are working properly and possibly check hormone levels

Treatments for ED

Ask your GP to explain the benefits and risks of each.

- Counselling
- Oral tablets
- Self-injection of a drug
- Vacuum pump devices
- Rigid or inflatable surgical implants
- Testosterone replacement (only for men with low levels of this hormone)

Medications for ED

Oral tablets

Tablets for ED help the blood vessels in the penis to relax. These medicines include sildenafil (Viagra, Avigra, Silvesta), tadalafil (Cialis), and vardenafil (Levitra).

They can be obtained on prescription from a doctor.

Sildenafil is now also available without a prescription from a pharmacy, after a consultation with the pharmacist. The pharmacist may also refer you back to your GP if they think you need further tests. These medicines have side effects such as headaches, flushing, dyspepsia, nasal congestion, muscle aches, and nausea.

Stop taking these medications and see your doctor if you have sudden changes in your vision.

Warning

Men with certain heart conditions who take nitrate medicines for angina must not take medicines for ED as the two medicines could react with each other and cause death.

Priapism is a persistent, often painful erection which lasts for several hours and is not associated with sexual interest or stimulation. It occurs when blood in the penis becomes trapped. It is a rare side effect of drugs used to treat ED and is important to know about. If this happens, you need to see a doctor immediately for treatment (within 6 hours of the erection starting) to prevent long term damage.

Medications to treat ED should be used with caution in those with penile deformity.

Injections

Most men are able to get an erection using an injection of a drug called prostaglandin into their penis. The erection may last for a while even after you have finished having sex. Some men do not like the idea of these injections. However, the injection is simple to use and almost painless. You may need to see a specialist before starting this treatment. Your first injection will need to be supervised by the doctor.

Other options

Vacuum pump devices or surgical implants are other treatment options which many men find acceptable and effective. You may be referred to a specialist (urologist) if medications for ED are not suitable for you, do not have the desired effect, or if you prefer a non-medication treatment.

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