

Erectile dysfunction

What is erectile dysfunction?

Erectile dysfunction refers to the inability of a man to achieve or maintain an erection sufficiently to have sexual intercourse. Most adult men have probably experienced temporary dysfunction (also referred to as impotence) at some time, which is often as a result of a psychological rather than a physical problem.

How common is the problem?

Erectile dysfunction is a common problem. Data from the US indicate that it affects four out of 10 men at 45 years of age, and two out of three men at 70 years of age. In some men the problem comes and goes, while in others it is permanent but treatable in many cases.

What about getting old?

Although the risk of impotence increases with age, it is not inevitable. Most men keep the ability to get an erection, although more stimulation is usually required.

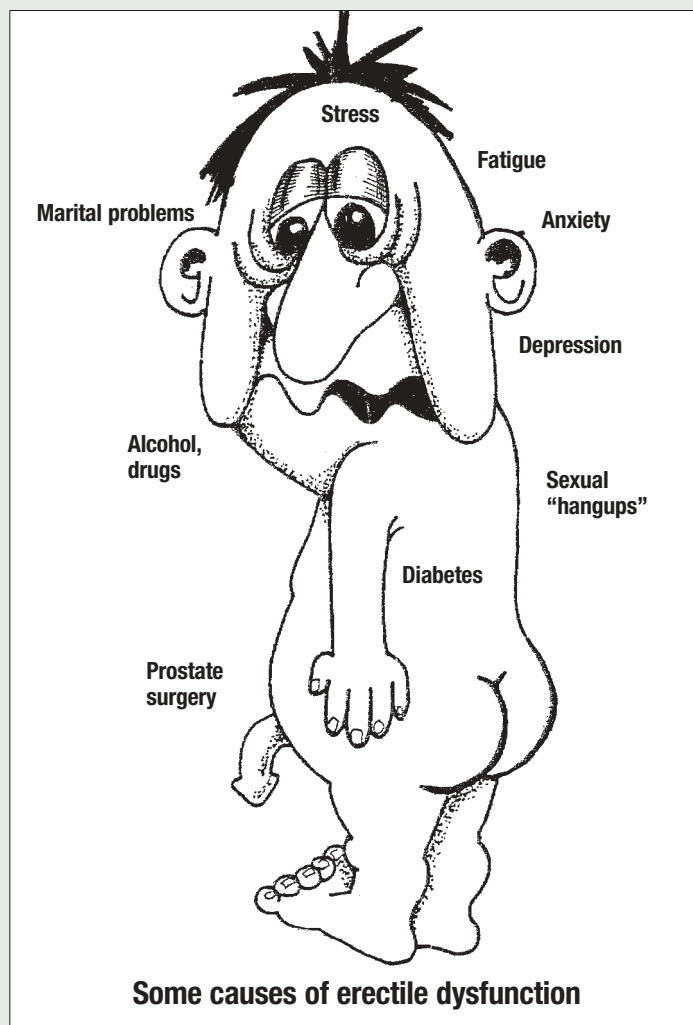
What are the causes?

Most cases of erectile dysfunction (up to 75%) have a physical (organic) cause while the rest have a psychological (functional) cause, such as:

- Stress and fatigue.
- Anxiety.
- Depression.
- Marital disharmony.
- Negative thoughts about sex and sexual performance.
- Guilty feelings.
- Ignorance about sexuality.
- Situational stress, such as other people in the home (eg, in-laws).

Physical causes

- Alcohol excess.
- Heavy smoking (four times the risk by age 50).
- Other drugs (eg, marijuana, heroin, cocaine).
- Prescribed drugs (eg, sedatives, antidepressants, blood pressure tablets).



- Chronic illness.
- Diabetes.
- Nervous system disorders (eg, stroke).
- Decreased circulation to penis.
- Hormone irregularities.
- Prostate surgery.
- Trauma, especially to the spine and pelvis.

Sometimes we don't know what causes impotence. You can get an idea of whether the problem is functional by being aware of erections during sleep (which usually occur 3-5 times in the night and last for about 90 minutes) or morning erections, or erections through self-stimulation.

What tests need to be performed?

If a physical cause is suspected, your doctor may order blood

tests. Otherwise special investigations to test penile function (including studies on erections during sleep) can be performed.

How can it be prevented?

- Careful treatment of any medical problem, especially diabetes.
- Avoid drugs of addiction, including common social drugs.
- Keep alcohol intake to acceptable levels.
- Avoid smoking.
- Check possible side effects of prescribed medicine with your doctor.
- Promote positive sexual feelings, including good communication with your partner.

What is the treatment?

If there is no physical cause then

attention should be paid to lifestyle and psychological factors, such as avoiding or reducing stress and overwork, as well as alcohol and smoking.

Counselling for psychological causes

This will involve brief sexual counselling for which you may be referred to a specialist clinic. It is important to attend with your partner.

New anti-impotence drugs

There are modern drugs which, taken by mouth, will usually restore the ability to get an erection with sexual stimulation. They work by neutralising the enzyme in the penis that prevents an erection, resulting in increased blood flow to the penis.

Viagra, Cialis and Levitra are the most common drugs in this class. There will be other drugs in the future.

Hormone treatment

Hormones will only be prescribed in the rare circumstance where blood tests reveal that a person is lacking a certain hormone essential for sexual function.

Injections

An important, alternative way to treat physical impotence is to give an injection of a special substance into the penis to achieve an erection. If a test dose works, you will be able to give yourself injections (up to three a week) before you intend to have intercourse. The injection in common use is Caverject.

Other methods

There are other ways to achieve intercourse should your impotence be resistant to other measures. These include:

- A vacuum device to make the penis erect.
- Surgery to implant a firm but flexible device.
- Surgery to implant an inflatable device.

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