



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



Erectile Dysfunction (Impotence)

Erectile dysfunction or ED (also called impotence) is the inability to get and/or keep a penile erection that allows satisfactory sexual intercourse. It is often a symptom of another physical or psychological problem. A range of effective treatments are available for ED.

Causes

Erectile dysfunction is quite common and becomes even more common with increasing age.

Causes of erectile dysfunction include:

- **Physical conditions** – there are many conditions that can interfere with erection of the penis by affecting blood flow or nerves. (e.g., high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, high cholesterol, sleep apnoea, Parkinson's disease, prostate surgery). Most cases of erectile dysfunction are physical in origin. When ED is caused by a physical condition it often develops slowly
- **Psychological factors** – a man's sexual drive and/or performance can be affected by stress and emotions (e.g., work problems, relationship difficulties, financial worries, grief). Mental health conditions (e.g., depression) and feeling anxious about sexual issues and sexual performance can also interfere with erections
- **A combination of physical illness and psychological factors** – the cause of ED may be both physical and psychological, (e.g., physical problems with maintaining an erection may cause the man to feel anxious about sexual intercourse, which makes the problem worse)
- **Medicines and drugs** – ED is an adverse effect of some medicines (e.g., narcotics, antidepressants, blood pressure medicines). Excessive alcohol, smoking and illicit drug use can also interfere with erections.



Occasional erectile dysfunction is normal

There is no need to worry about the occasional failure to get or keep an erection – it is normal and most men experience it. Causes include excessive alcohol, anxiety and tiredness. In fact, one of the most common causes of ED in middle-aged men is lack of sleep.

Treatments

There are treatments that can enable erections to happen or be maintained. A doctor can help find the cause of your erectile dysfunction and advise on the best treatment for you. Counselling and/or tablets are usually the first step in treatment. Other treatments may be possible if counselling and tablets do not help.

Treatments for erectile dysfunction include:

- **Psychotherapy and counselling** – these can be helpful if the underlying cause of ED is psychological. It can also benefit the man who has lost sexual confidence, even though his erectile dysfunction is caused by physical factors
- **Tablets** – (e.g., *Viagra*, *Cialis* and *Levitra*) – must be prescribed by a doctor and can help about 70% of men with ED. These medicines are not aphrodisiacs and do not increase libido. They increase blood flow to the penis during sexual stimulation. They will not produce an erection without sexual stimulation and take time to work. Some men can get an erection within 15 minutes of taking a tablet, while for others it takes 1/2 to 1 hour before they are able to have sexual intercourse
- **Penile rings** – a rubber ring is placed around the base of the penis to maintain an erection
- **Vacuum devices** – a vacuum pump is placed over the penis to draw blood into it
- **Injections** – (e.g., *Caverject*) – some medicines produce an erection when injected into the penis, by increasing penile blood flow. A potential side effect is a painful prolonged erection, known as 'priapism'
- **Hormone therapy** – this is suitable for men whose levels of testosterone (male sex hormone) are too low
- **Penile implants** – a small inflatable device is surgically implanted into the penis. When squeezed, it 'pumps up' the penis
- **Changing prescription medicines** – in consultation with your doctor, if they are the cause.

There is no conclusive scientific evidence to support the use of herbal medicines to treat ED.

Self care

Maintain a healthy lifestyle to reduce the risks of medical conditions which may cause erectile dysfunction (e.g., high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity).

- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar and salt.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

Important

Tablets for ED must not be used with medicines or drugs called nitrates, because the combination may result in dangerously low blood pressure. Nitrate tablets, injections, patches and sprays are prescribed by doctors for treatment of angina (ischaemic heart disease) and some rectal ointments also contain nitrates. Different types of nitrates are used as illicit social drugs (e.g., poppers, amyl, rush).

- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises otherwise).
- Keep to a healthy weight.
- Limit alcohol.
- Don't smoke.

If you are experiencing ED seek medical help, whether or not you want to have sex, as ED may be a symptom of another medical condition. Early diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions can reduce the damage done to body tissues including the penis.

- A local doctor is the best place to start enquiries about ED.
- Be very wary of responding to advertising about ED treatments.
- Be open and honest with your sex partner to encourage a good understanding of the problem and a positive result for your relationship.

Related fact cards

- *Men's Health*
- *Prostate Problems*

For more information

Andrology Australia – phone 1300 303 878 or website www.andrologyaustralia.org

Impotence Australia – phone 1800 800 614 or website www.impotenceaustralia.com.au

Relationships Australia – phone 1300 364 277 for support and counselling or website www.relationships.com.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.