Erectile dysfunction
Erectile dysfunction (or impotence) is when you cannot get or keep an erection that enables you to have sex. Most cases of erectile dysfunction have a physical cause. It is normal for men to experience erectile dysfunction from time to time, perhaps from tiredness or drinking too much alcohol. Ongoing erectile dysfunction should be investigated by a doctor. Men with diabetes are at a higher risk of erectile dysfunction especially if their diabetes is not well controlled. Treatments include counselling, oral medications, vacuum devices, penile injections and implants.

Erectile dysfunction (or impotence) is a man’s inability to get or keep an erection that allows sexual activity with penetration. Erectile dysfunction is not a disease, but a symptom of some other problem – physical, psychological or a mixture of both. Don’t worry about occasional failure to get or keep an erection. This is normal. Some of the causes include drinking too much alcohol, anxiety and tiredness. Unless it continues, there is no reason to be concerned. However, if your erectile dysfunction is ongoing, see a doctor. Treatments for erectile dysfunction include medications given orally (usually tablets), counselling, vacuum penile pump devices, injections directly into the penis, and penile prosthetic implants.

Causes of erectile dysfunction

Doctors used to think that erectile dysfunction was mainly caused by psychological factors, such as anxiety or depression. In fact, most cases of erectile dysfunction are caused by physical illness. Psychological problems cause only one in ten cases of persistent erectile dysfunction.

Physical erectile dysfunction happens over a period of months or years, and is often a gradual loss of function. If erections still occur spontaneously overnight or in the morning, the problem may be psychological.

Erectile dysfunction can be due to:

- physical illness – erectile dysfunction is often associated with conditions that affect blood flow in the penis, such as: diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, cigarette smoking, obesity, heart disease and multiple sclerosis
- psychological factors – a man’s sexual drive or performance can be affected by stress such as problems at work, relationship difficulties or financial worries. Psychiatric conditions, and feeling depressed or anxious about poor sexual performance can also result in erectile dysfunction
- a combination of physical illness and psychological factors – physical problems with maintaining an erection may cause the man to feel anxious about sexual performance, which makes the problem worse
- medications – prescribed medicines used to treat high blood pressure, high cholesterol, depression and psychiatric disorders, and prostate disease, may cause or worsen the symptoms of erectile dysfunction
- unknown – in a few cases, neither physical nor psychological causes are obvious. Vascular disease is likely to be the underlying cause in these cases.

Diagnosis of the cause of ongoing erectile dysfunction

If you have ongoing erectile dysfunction, have it investigated by a doctor. While occasional erectile dysfunction is normal, ongoing erectile dysfunction can be a symptom of a serious physical illness.

Your doctor can fully investigate any ongoing problems to check for any underlying medical cause that may also need treatment. This may include heart and blood vessel diseases, diabetes, high blood pressure or high cholesterol.

Tests can determine if the blood flow to your penis is affected. Blood tests can also help to determine if hormone problems, such as low testosterone, are causing the erectile dysfunction.

Once you find out whether your erectile dysfunction has a physical or psychological cause, you can get the proper course of treatment.

Treatment for erectile dysfunction

There are many treatments for erectile dysfunction. These include:

- changing your prescription medication if it is the cause
- psychotherapy and counselling
- oral medication (tablets) such as Viagra®, Cialis® and Levitra®
external vacuum penile pump devices to create blood flow
injections directly into the penis (such as Caverject Impulse®)
penile prosthetic implants
hormone therapy (rarely given)
vascular surgery (rarely undertaken).

The first approach is to treat the underlying cause if one is identified. If no underlying cause is found, treatments to directly restore erectile function are used.

There are many treatments aimed at restoring erectile function. These can be grouped according to their level of invasiveness, being:

- non-invasive treatments
- minimally invasive treatments
- surgical treatments.

Doctors usually start with the least invasive treatment, such as tablets. If that doesn’t work, they may suggest more complicated injection treatments or surgery.

**Non-invasive treatments for erectile dysfunction**

Non-invasive treatments include:

- treating the underlying cause such as disease or depression
- oral medication (tablets)
- counselling
- external devices such as vacuum penile pumps or rubber rings.

**Medication** (usually tablets) is effective in about 70 per cent of men with erectile dysfunction. Brand names include Viagra®, Cialis® and Levitra®. These are known as PDE5 inhibitors – they inhibit a particular enzyme in the penis, improving the erectile response to normal sexual stimulation.

Tablets should usually be taken at least one hour before sexual contact. With Cialis® tablets, taking a lower dose on a daily basis can allow more spontaneous sexual activity. Fatty meals and large amounts of alcohol can interfere with the body’s absorption of some of these medications.

Side effects may include facial flushing, nasal congestion, headaches and indigestion. Although these medications act in a similar way, there are important differences between them, such as the period of time for which they are active.

Your doctor will help you decide the best treatment for you. Oral medication may not be suitable for all men. If you are taking nitrate-containing heart medication, consult your doctor as erectile dysfunction medication may interact with these medications.

**Counselling and psychotherapy** can help if one of the underlying causes of your erectile dysfunction is psychological. Counselling can also benefit men who have lost sexual confidence, even though their erectile dysfunction is caused by physical factors. Counselling may be provided by your doctor, a psychologist or a psychiatrist. Your partner may also be involved.

**External devices** such as vacuum penile pumps or rubber rings can help with erectile dysfunction. A vacuum device is a pump placed over the penis to create blood flow. It draws blood into specific tissues of the penis (the two corpora cavernosa), mimicking a normal erection.

Placing a rubber ring around the base of the penis can help make it rigid enough for intercourse. This can be useful when you are able to get an erection, but have difficulty maintaining it.

Devices such as vacuums and rings are not always successful. Side effects may include penile pain, numbness, coldness and difficulty ejaculating. These devices need to be properly explained and fitted, and are best used after consultation with a doctor.

**Minimally invasive treatments for erectile dysfunction**

Minimally invasive treatments include:

- injections
- testosterone replacement therapy (TRT).

Some medication can increase blood flow when it is **injected** into the penis. A penile injection can create an erection within five to 10 minutes and last for up to one hour.

You will need to be shown how to use the penile injections properly and practise several supervised injections in the doctor’s surgery.

One possible side effect of penile injections is a painful erection lasting for hours, known as priapism. This occurs if the medication dose is too high. If an erection lasts for four hours or longer, your penis may be permanently damaged. In this situation, seek immediate medical attention.

**Testosterone replacement therapy (TRT)** is only suitable for men whose levels of testosterone are low. Before treatment, a doctor needs to investigate the cause of your low testosterone.

**Surgical treatments for erectile dysfunction**

Surgical treatments for erectile dysfunction include:

- penile prosthetic implant – a device that is surgically implanted into the penis. It can enable erections through a mechanism that is activated by squeezing on a specific part of the device. Penile prosthetic implants are expensive and generally used only as a last resort, if other treatments have not worked
- vascular surgery – targets the veins and arteries that supply blood to the penis. This is a major operation and is rarely used. Surgery may help men who have vascular damage due to trauma in the area around the penis — for example, after a car accident or fall.
Men with diabetes and erectile dysfunction

Men with diabetes have a higher risk of erectile dysfunction, especially if their diabetes is not well controlled. The reasons for this are not fully understood.

Over the long term, poor control of your diabetes may result in increased damage to the nerves and circulation that control blood flow to your penis. If you keep your blood glucose levels in the target range, these problems are less likely to occur.

Unproven claims for treating erectile dysfunction

Many products available ‘over the counter’ or via the internet claim to treat or even cure erectile dysfunction. These products are often expensive and usually have not been adequately tested for either their side effects or results.

There have been cases of serious health consequences from use of ‘erection therapies’ obtained online. Treat such products with caution and use only under the supervision of a doctor.

Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
- Community health centre
- MensLine Australia Tel. 1300 78 99 78
- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre Tel. (03) 9341 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY (for people with a hearing impairment) (03) 9347 8619
- Diabetes educator
- Diabetes Victoria Tel. 1300 437 386
- Life! Helping you prevent diabetes, heart disease and stroke Tel. 13 RISK (13 7475)

References

- Erectile dysfunction, 2018, Healthymale (Andrology Australia).

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Please note that we cannot answer personal medical queries. If you are looking for health or medical advice we recommend that you:

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More information

Sexual health

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Sexual health basics
- Sexual relationships
- Sexuality and sexual identity
- Sex education
- Sexual assault and abuse
- Contraception and abortion
- Sexual issues throughout life
- Health conditions and sexual issues

Sexual health basics

- Contraception - condoms for men
  Condoms are the most effective way to reduce your risk of contracting a sexually transmissible infection (STI) during sex...
- Contraception - condoms for women
  The female condom is effective in preventing an unplanned pregnancy and protecting against sexually transmissible infections (STIs).
- Contraception - choices
  The method of contraception you choose will depend on your general health, lifestyle and relationships.
- Contraception - emergency contraception
  It is best to take emergency contraception as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of having unprotected sex, but it still works well within 96 hours (four days).
- Masturbation

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Masturbation is a normal and healthy way for people to explore their own bodies.

- **Safe sex**
  Safe sex is sexual contact that doesn't involve the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners.

- **Sex – are you ready**
  It is normal to have mixed feelings about having sex with someone else.

- **Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)**
  It is not difficult to avoid catching sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

- **Women's sexual and reproductive health (video)**
  Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraception, menopause, parental consent and conditions (such as PCOS and endometriosis).

### Sexual relationships

- **Partying safely and sex**
  Partying is fun but being out of it on alcohol or drugs can put you at risk of unwanted or unsafe sex.

- **Safe sex**
  Safe sex is sexual contact that doesn't involve the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners.

- **Sex – are you ready**
  It is normal to have mixed feelings about having sex with someone else.

- **Time to immunise - free vaccines for men who have sex with men**
  Immunisation is one of the best ways you can protect yourself and others from infectious diseases in our community. In partnership with Thorne Harbour Health (formerly Victorian AIDS Council), the...

- **Women's sexual and reproductive health (video)**
  Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraception, menopause, parental consent and conditions (such as PCOS and endometriosis).

### Sexuality and sexual identity

- **Bisexuality**
  Bisexuality is when a person finds men and women physically, sexually or emotionally attractive.

- **Family violence and the LGBTIQ communities**
  Within Australia, intimate partner violence is the most common form of family violence. Evidence presented to the Royal Commission into Family Violence suggests intimate partner violence is as...

- **Gay male sexuality**
  There is no real explanation as to why some men are gay and others are not; it is just part of the wide variety of human sexuality...

- **Lesbian sexuality**
  Many women report they have lesbian experiences or feelings, but do not think of themselves as lesbians.

- **Men and sexuality**
  Sexuality is not about whom we have sex with, or how often we have it. Sexuality is about our sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours towards other people. We can find other people...

- **Mental health and wellbeing support for LGBTI people**
  If you or someone you know requires support from an LGBTI or mental health organisation there are services available...

- **Sexuality explained**
  Sexuality is not about whom we have sex with, or how often we have it. Sexuality is about our sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours towards other people. We can find other people...

- **Switchboard (Victoria)**
  The Gay and Lesbian Switchboard (Victoria) is a telephone helpline that gives advice, information, counselling and referrals to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) people in...

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**betterhealth.vic.gov.au**
Trans and gender diverse people

Your gender is what feels natural to you, even if it is different from your biological sex. Some people may not feel comfortable with their biological sex but choose to live with the gender with which...

Women and sexuality

Most girls start puberty around 10 years old, but it can be earlier or later than that. Your body will go through big changes as you change from a girl into a young woman. For some girls (and women...

Sex education

- **Sex education - tips for parents**
  Mothers are more likely to talk about intimate, emotional and psychological aspects of sex than fathers...

- **Talking to children with cognitive disability about sex**
  All people, including those with cognitive disabilities, have the right to explore and express their sexuality in appropriate ways...

- **Talking to pre-schoolers about sex**
  By four, most children are curious about certain sexual issues, and they need honest answers to their questions...

- **Talking to primary school children about sex**
  Some parents find it hard to talk with their primary age children about sex, but help is available...

- **Talking to young people about sex**
  Talking about sex with your child is easier if you start when your child is young...

- **Talking to young people with cognitive disabilities about sex**
  Young people with cognitive disabilities have the same range of sexual feelings and desires as young people without disabilities...

- **Women's sexual and reproductive health (video)**
  Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraception, menopause, parental consent and conditions (such as PCOS and endometriosis)...

Sexual assault and abuse

- **Date rape**
  Date rape can be especially common among young people who have had little sexual experience and aren’t sure that what they have experienced crosses the line into rape. Many victims of date rape can...

- **People with a disability who experience violence, abuse or neglect**
  People with a disability who experience violence, abuse or neglect can seek help from a range of services specifically designed to help them...

- **Recognising when a child is at risk**
  Too many children are physically, sexually and emotionally abused and when this happens, it is up to adults to speak up...

- **Sexual abuse**
  If you suspect sexual abuse or have been told about it by a child, you must report it...

- **Sexual abuse - helping your child**
  As a parent, you have an important role in helping your child recover from sexual abuse...

- **Sexual assault**
  Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual behaviour or activity that makes the victim feel uncomfortable, frightened or threatened...

Contraception and abortion

- **Abortion**
  All women should have access to accurate information about abortion so they can make their own informed decisions...

- **Abortion procedures - medication**
  Mifepristone, also called RU486 or the 'abortion pill', is used to terminate (end) a pregnancy up to nine weeks...

- **Abortion procedures - surgical**
  Abortion is one of the most common and safest types of surgery in Australia...
• Contraception after an abortion
Whether you have a surgical or medical abortion you can become fertile again very soon after the abortion, so it's important to start using contraception immediately if you wish to prevent any...

• Contraception after giving birth
After having a baby, you need to choose an effective method of contraception if you don't want to have another baby straight away...

• Contraception - choices
The method of contraception you choose will depend on your general health, lifestyle and relationships...

• Contraception - condoms for men
Condoms are the most effective way to reduce your risk of contracting a sexually transmissible infection (STI) during sex...

• Contraception - condoms for women
The female condom is effective in preventing an unplanned pregnancy and protecting against sexually transmissible infections (STIs)...

• Contraception - diaphragms
The diaphragm acts as a barrier method of contraception...

• Contraception - emergency contraception
It is best to take emergency contraception as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of having unprotected sex, but it still works well within 96 hours (four days)...

• Contraception - implants and injections
Hormonal contraception for women is available as implants or injections that slowly release hormones into the body over time...

• Contraception - injections for men
Contraceptive injections for men are not yet available in Australia, but clinical studies suggest that they may provide a safe, effective and reversible method of male contraception in the future...

• Contraception - intruterine devices (IUD)
An intrauterine device (IUD) is a small contraceptive device that is put into the uterus (womb) to prevent pregnancy...

• Contraception - Louna's lowdown on emergency contraception (video)
This video was made by the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, Australia, with Louna Maroun to inform teenagers about this safe, effective form of contraception to prevent an unplanned pregnancy...

• Contraception – the combined pill
The two types of oral contraception available in Australia are the combined pill, known as the Pill, and the mini pill...

• Contraception - the mini pill
The two types of oral contraception available in Australia are the combined pill, known as "the Pill", and the mini pill...

• Contraception - tubal ligation
Sterilisation is a permanent method of contraception that a woman can choose if she is sure that she does not want children in the future...

• Contraception - vaginal ring
The vaginal ring works in a similar way to the oral contraceptive pill to prevent pregnancy...

• Contraception - vasectomy
Having a vasectomy does not affect a man's ability to produce male sex hormones, enjoy sex or reach orgasm...

• Pregnancy - unplanned
When a woman does not want to become a parent, her pregnancy options may include abortion or adoption...

Sexual issues throughout life

• Cognitive disability and sexuality
People with intellectual disability can express their sexuality in satisfying ways...

• Menopause and sexual issues
Menopause, the final menstrual period, is a natural event that marks the end of a woman's reproductive years...
Physical disability and sexuality

Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support.

Puberty

Adjusting to the many changes that happen around puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people.

Sex and chronic illness

Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support.

Health conditions and sexual issues

Brain injury and sexual issues

A brain injury can change the way a person experiences and expresses their sexuality.

Cognitive disability and sexuality

People with intellectual disability can express their sexuality in satisfying ways.

Diabetes and erectile dysfunction

Men with diabetes are more prone to problems with erectile dysfunction or impotence.

HIV and men - safer sex

HIV transmission can occur from men to women and from women to men as well as between men who have sex with men.

HIV and women - having children

Women living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), or women whose partner is HIV-positive, may wish to have children but feel concerned about the risk of transmission of the virus to themselves (if...)

HIV and women – safer sex

Practising safe sex is important, whether your partner is HIV-positive or not.

Parkinson’s disease and sexual issues

Communication is the best remedy for all types of relationship problems, including sexual problems caused by Parkinson’s disease.

Physical disability and sexuality

Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support.

Sex and chronic illness

Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support.

Time to immunise - free vaccines for men who have sex with men

Immunisation is one of the best ways you can protect yourself and others from infectious diseases in our community. In partnership with Thorne Harbour Health (formerly Victorian AIDS Council), the...