

'Problems in bedroom can save your life'

Experts say erectile dysfunction is often an early sign for possible cardiac diseases and heart attacks

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LIFE-SAVING: Durban-based sexologist Dr Prithy Ramlachan says the onset of erectile dysfunction could mean the possibility of heart-related problems Picture: RICHARD SHOREY

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MEN who have lost that loving feeling in the bedroom should get their hearts checked. That's the view of medical experts, who say that erectile dysfunction (ED) - the inability to achieve an erection - could in fact be an early warning of a heart attack.

"Erectile dysfunction could actually save your life. It has been proven that shortly after the condition is diagnosed, the patient might experience his first cardiac event," said Durban sexologist Dr Prithy Ramlachan.

Experts have also found that erectile dysfunction was a pointer of other underlying conditions, including coronary artery disease, hypertension, diabetes, testosterone deficiency and obesity and should not be seen as a separate sex-related problem.

Although no broad studies have been done in South Africa, Ramlachan says it can be assumed that Indian and African men were more prone to diabetes, high cholesterol, hypertension, testosterone deficiency and obesity.

"Both African and Indian men have a higher incidence of cardiovascular disease, so one can assume that they would have a higher degree of endocrine dysfunction which is the precursor for heart disease and erectile dysfunction," said Ramlachan.

Speaking at a men's health conference recently, Johannesburg-based endocrinologist Dr Sundeep Bhana encouraged more doctors to engage in open dialogue with their patients. He said 50% of men between the ages 20 and 70 would experience erectile dysfunction sometime in their lives.

"At least 64% of patients with ED also suffer from hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol. It's not only about sexuality. This can lead to cardiovascular disease, heart attack and stroke."

Bhana said of the patients with type two diabetes that at least 50% suffered from erectile dysfunction while men with "boeps" had lower levels of testosterone, resulting in erectile dysfunction.

"As part of the aging process, testosterone levels will drop as you get older. Lifestyle changes are important and while it would not cure erectile dysfunction, it helped in stabilising testosterone levels."

He stressed that regular exercise was equally important, adding that 190 minutes a week of physical exercise improved erectile dysfunction.

Well-known sex therapist Dr Eve said ED and andropause, the male counterpart to menopause, were linked to a newly diagnosed and well-known condition known as metabolic syndrome.

"It's quite a new concept in sexual medicine. It is created by a host of lifestyle diseases such as smoking, alcohol, body mass index and having other lifestyle disease such as hypertension, elevated thyroid, high blood pressure, cholesterol and diabetes."

An accumulation of a bad lifestyle and chronic disease leads to low testosterone, resulting in erectile dysfunction, said Dr Eve.

Research also showed that 45% of men over the age of 45 will suffer from erectile dysfunction.

A combination of andropause and metabolic syndrome can cause loss of bone, changes to the central nervous system, loss of cognitive ability, changes in bone mass, loss of bone marrow and changes in prostate, said Dr Eve.

"You can't just give people medication. You have to give them lifestyle management. It's what we call an integral treatment approach and doctors have got to design management programme for patients," she said, adding that doctors must be encouraged to include sexual health during consults.

Experts said a complete overhaul in lifestyle changes were an integral part of treatment.

Dr Nevon Ramsunder, of Mens' Clinic International, which exclusively treats patients with erectile dysfunction, said he had noticed a significant increase in the number of Indian men treated for the condition.

"This is largely due to an increase in awareness of the condition, a less conservative mind-set among Indian men, an increased incidence of underlying pathology, such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiac disease, stress and women being more supportive of their partners," said Ramsunder.

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