

## IT'S A MAN'S WORLD

Ramathibodi Hospital's Men's Health Clinic aims to clear up misconceptions that such clinics deal solely with male sexual problems

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It was another busy Friday afternoon at Ramathibodi Hospital's Men's Health Clinic, where around 40 men came for a check-up, despite a Songkran week of political unrest in Thailand. While waiting to see the doctor, there were perhaps conversations about the outrageous assassination attempt of a PAD leader, Premier League football and other matters that men like to talk about, but in general the patients were fervently occupied with filling in four to five questionnaires.

No, they were not rating "How sizzling is your sex life?" or "Are you an absolute metrosexual?", found in glossies, but going through health-related questionnaires, designed to give an insight into men's well-being. They were doing the Aging Male Symptoms and the International Prostate Symptoms questionnaires, hoping for the lower, the better scores. In contrast, it's the higher, the better for the International Index of Erectile Function (IIEF), of which there are two questionnaires to assess whether impotence is wilting their manhood and sex lives.

"I get to do these exams every three months," joked one 70-something patient. "At first, I had difficulty in doing them because there are so many questions. In addition, I have to add up to get the total score and my brains hasn't been doing much calculation since I left school. Now, it's much easier and my scores are getting better after treatment."

A breakdown in the bedroom can have macho men seeking medical advice, but for seniors like the septuagenarian at this men's health clinic, multiple symptoms may get them knocking on the doctor's door. Besides a loss of sexual desire and function, fatigue, poor concentration, increased body fat, reduced muscle mass and strength, and depression can all be signs of Testosterone-Deficiency Syndrome (TDS), which is specifically called Late-Onset Hypogonadism (LOH) when occurring in older men.

The Aging Male Symptoms (AMS) questionnaire digs into testosterone deficiency symptoms, asking about, for example joint pains and muscular aches, excessive sweating, sleep problems, decreased beard growth and decrease in the number of morning erections. After answering 17 questions and totalling the score, if it's 26 or higher the doctor may advise checking male hormone levels, and if abnormal, may prescribe testosterone therapy. The availability of a long-lasting testosterone injection in Thailand means that instead of taking pills every day, men with LOH can simply go for four shots of hormone a year.

"There is a common misconception that a men's health clinic is about sexual health when it actually addresses a man's general health. Likewise, people may misunderstand that testosterone therapy is for merely sexual disorders when it can help restore the overall health of men with LOH," says urologist and men's health expert, Sompol Permpongkosol MD.

Testosterone, while primarily produced in the testes, does a lot more than spawning sperm. Besides the male sexual organs, it affects the brain, skin, bones, kidneys, liver and bone marrow, and so plays various roles in maintaining body function and good health. The male hormone is also associated with increased muscles and decreased fat mass - gearing guys for an Arnold Schwarzenegger physique.

Going downhill after the age of 40, testosterone levels decrease by approximately 1.2 percent a year and by 70, a man would have lost approximately 35 percent of his original active testosterone. However, men with originally high levels may maintain normal levels into old age, thus experiencing no problems at all with natural hormonal changes.

Is there really a so-called 'male menopause'? Some doctors like to call it andropause while Dr Sompol prefers to use the term LOH.

"Women may experience obvious menopausal symptoms because of a more dramatic plunge in hormone levels. Men may not be affected by a gradual decline in male hormones but some cases do suffer from symptoms of LOH, which negatively affects quality of life," Dr Sompol says. "While women agree to menopause as a wai thong (golden age), Thai men don't seem to be happy with the term chai wai thong (men in their golden age). And so instead of a 'wai thong clinic' for men, Ramathibodi Hospital offers a men's health clinic instead."

Testosterone therapy together with lifestyle modification can help give men a slimmer waistline.

Men are regarded as having low testosterone levels if their blood testosterone levels are below 12 nmol/L. A doctor will assess medical history, conduct a general physical examination and a prostate examination to confirm LOH and to evaluate whether testosterone replacement therapy is required.

"While it can help improve psychological, physical and sexual health of LOH patients, testosterone replacement is not a magic bullet. It also takes lifestyle modification to be in better health. Regular exercising, for example, may boost testosterone levels to the normal range in some patients, and there may be no need for further treatment with the hormone," he says.

Extensive research in hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in women has led to controversy about its usage. Testosterone replacement therapy is also controversial but, in contrast, due to the lack of studies, especially in ageing males and long-term treatment.

Dr Sompol is currently investigating the efficacy and safety of a new long-acting testosterone injection in the treatment of LOH at Ramathibodi Hospital. Launched in January 2007, the study recruited 145 LOH patients, with a mean age of 60. After two years, 124 patients are still on therapy, receiving an intramuscular injection every three months. Reported side effects include weight gain, headaches and acne while the study's preliminary results show the potential efficacy of the treatment in lowering AMS scores and improving men's health, from reviving morning erections to trimming the waistline.

How did it cut inches? Accumulated visceral fat is another problem of LOH, and so testosterone which decreases fat mass can help shrink a bulging belly. Dr Sompol emphasises again that along with the hormone replacement therapy patients had to do their part in diet-control and regularly work out to get a flatter tummy.

For Thai men, a waist circumference larger than 90cm indicates a risk of metabolic syndrome - a cluster of health conditions comprising abdominal obesity, high blood pressure, high blood sugar (glucose), high triglycerides and low HDL cholesterol

levels. With metabolic syndrome on the rise among Thais, men should be aware that it increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases, including heart attacks.

"Patients with LOH in this study have other health conditions such as dyslipidemia, erectile dysfunction (ED), and metabolic syndrome. And so we're seeing a link between LOH, ED and metabolic syndrome," notes the urologist. "Whatever symptoms are bothering men, they should proactively seek medical advice for the early detection of underlying diseases and further take a holistic approach in managing all health problems."

So with loss of libido, failing erections, flabby muscles, and sleepless nights, men with LOH shouldn't shy away from joining the graying gang at a men's health clinic. Dr Sompol adds: "Not for virility or to make them effervescently younger, consulting a doctor can help uncover and treat underlying diseases so men can live to an older age and with quality of life."

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