

Reinvigorate your relationship by treating a common ailment

by SANDY ECKERT for Body & Mind

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When Bob Dole started talking about Viagra and erectile dysfunction back in 1998, impotence finally came out of the closet. That was back when Dole, a former U.S. Senator, had just finished a run for the presidency. His household name and straight talk brought to light a subject rarely spoken about in public.

Today, \$2 billion of Viagra is sold each year, said Dr. Scott Owens, a urologist at Urology of Central Pa. in Camp Hill. Now, talking about impotence is no longer verboten, and two other drugs -- Cialis and Levitra -- compete for a share of the ED market.

At least 20 million American men suffer from ED, said Dr. J.C. Trussell, a Penn State Milton Hershey Medical Center urologist and surgeon who specializes in erectile dysfunction. For 20 percent of men, impotence is actually a non-physical problem, caused by stress, fatigue, depression, or negative feelings by the man or his partner. The answer for those men is often therapy.

But for about 50 to 75 percent of men with ED, the problem is physical, even though there is some psychological component -- because just having the disorder is stressful. Normally, nerve impulses trigger an influx of blood to the penis when it is stimulated, expanding it. Dysfunction is diagnosed when this consistently does not happen.

Physical problems causing ED include nerve damage from diabetes; cardiovascular disease; low testosterone level; certain prescription medicines, such as antidepressants; alcoholism; drug abuse; and spinal cord fractures. Dole's ED was the result of prostate cancer surgery, another common cause.

Causes of malady

Taking a pill is the easiest way to put romance back in a man's life, and maybe the medicines do "reinvigorate the sexual revolution of the 1960s," as Owens said, but pills are dangerous for some men. That's why blood screening and a physical exam precede any method of treatment. For example, taking medicines, including nitroglycerin, for cardiovascular disorders contraindicates taking ED pills.

Low testosterone levels, which can happen with age, will show up in blood tests, as will diabetes. That's how erectile dysfunction can be a signal that something else is wrong, said both Trussell and Owens.

As for aging -- it is not a precursor of impotence, Trussell said. It's just that older men are more likely to have other conditions. Those conditions or the medicines for them can cause ED.

Mixing pills can fail

Paul sought treatment for ED in 1992, a couple of years after experiencing impotence. That was BV: Before Viagra. So Paul, 76 in 2007, opted for a penile implant. "The doctor not Trussell told me about shots, an external pump and a tiny suppository," said Paul, of Lebanon County. "I didn't care for those ideas, but he said if my wife would come in, he'd show us a film about the implant operation."

Paul's implant involved placing a device within the penis on both sides, he said. Those semi-rigid rods keep a constant erection, Trussell said, so he rarely suggests the procedure.

But for Paul, it worked. "I was in heaven. I really love my wife. When we had no satisfaction, we both got grouchy." His implant lasted about five years, and at that time, he saw Trussell, who prescribed Viagra. It didn't work well, so Trussell surgically inserted a prosthesis that was not constantly erect. It included a pump inserted in the scrotum. "I can almost guarantee an erection with that," Trussell said.

Paul's surgery was successful enough for him to tell other men about it. "Dr. Trussell asked me to talk to some men who might have the pump put in," he said. "I talked to them, and my wife talked to their partners."

Last resort

The penile prosthesis is Trussell's last line of treatment in a tier of three treatments that he tries, if the man's blood tests are normal. If not, he controls any other medical problem the man has before prescribing ED medicine and tells him to exercise.

"Exercise is the only thing that improves ED in some men," Trussell said. Lack of exercise can cause hardening of the arteries, which prevents blood from going into the penis to cause an erection.

The pills allow, rather than cause, an erection and take effect in 15 minutes to an hour. About 70 percent of impotent men will do OK with exercise and prescription drug treatment, Trussell said. The medications relax muscles in the penis and allow the blood flow needed for an erection.

"Tom," 53, took Viagra beginning in 2001. He said he'd had very few erections from age 16 on, and Viagra worked sporadically for him. He has diabetes, and some of the medicines he takes for that countered the effect of Viagra. He couldn't maintain an erection long enough to have sex, and he had side effects. Among them, cottonmouth and slurred speech. Levitra worked the same as Viagra for Tom but without the side effects.

On to Solution 2

If the first line of treatment doesn't work, Trussell goes to his second line. He combines one of the medicines with injection therapy or a penile suppository. The man uses an extremely fine needle to inject alprostadil into the base side of his penis. The drug works like Viagra. A man usually has an erection in five to 20 minutes, and it lasts about an hour, according to MayoClinic.com.

The suppository, which is half the size of a grain of rice, said Trussell, also contains alprostadil and is administered by self-insertion into the tip of the penis. This treatment -- medicines plus injection or suppository -- is expensive and carries a

greater risk for an erection to last over four hours, which causes pain and might cause scarring inside the penis, Trussell said. In addition, oxygen in the man's blood could decrease enough to cause death.

Tom tried injections five times, though not combined with oral medicine. He stopped because his erections caused physical discomfort.

A third chance

If neither injections nor suppositories with oral meds work, Trussell does the prosthesis surgery that Paul had. Tom chose to have a prosthesis, too. "I should have done it years ago when Dr. Trussell mentioned it," he said.

In addition to the treatments Trussell uses, Owens sometimes prescribes an external vacuum device that comes with rubber bands, called tension rings. It works by placing a hollow plastic tube over the penis and using the vacuum to pull blood into the penis. Then a tension ring is placed at the base of the penis, which holds the erection, so that the vacuum device can be removed. "It works for almost anybody, and you can use it whenever you want," said Owens, who also encourages his patients to have a stress test.

Another factor, besides medical treatments, to correct ED exists, Owens said. That's the man's partner because erectile dysfunction affects two people not one.

"I ask for the woman to come in, but they usually don't," Owens said. "Maybe she's too embarrassed, or he's so embarrassed that he doesn't want her there. But it's not a big deal. It's just time to talk. I encourage the women to learn about ED and its treatment. I want them to talk about their frustrations and sexual expectations."

Often, women blame themselves, as Joan, Paul's wife, did. "I didn't like the way I felt about it," she said. "Our relationship was different, and I thought it could be me. I was willing to go to the doctor with him. It involved both of us."

Tom said having ED "probably caused problems in my first marriage because I was afraid to talk about it. My wife now was very supportive. I've been open in this marriage, and she's learned about ED and treatments."

With Viagra's success rate at 70 percent of men who try it, the easy-to-use prescription medicines are likely to remain the favored ED treatment. Because this is a cure-by-pill society, it's natural to question whether ED medications are over-prescribed. They're not, Owens said. "I wonder how many men have erectile dysfunction and are not diagnosed. The drugs improve lifestyle and overall well-being."

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