

Pharmacists Can Help Patients Understand Erectile Dysfunction

Pharmacists can have a significant impact on the quality of life of men who suffer from erectile dysfunction. Erectile dysfunction (ED) is the repeated inability to get or keep an erection firm enough for sexual intercourse.

Determining the actual frequency of erectile dysfunction (ED) is difficult, though studies have suggested a prevalence of 7 percent to 8 percent of the male population. It is estimated that ED affects between 15 million and 30 million American men. With the baby-boomer generation reaching their middle years, erectile dysfunction (ED) will be a major concern for a growing percentage of the U.S. population.

ED's Causes

Since an erection requires a set sequence of events, ED can occur when any stage of the process is disrupted. The sequence involves nerve impulses in the spinal column, brain, response in muscles, fibrous tissues, veins, and arteries in and around the penis.

Any injury to nerves, arteries, smooth muscles, and fibrous tissues, typically as a result of disease, is the most common cause of ED. Conditions—such as diabetes, multiple sclerosis, kidney disease, chronic alcoholism, atherosclerosis, vascular disease, and neurological disease—account for about 70 percent of ED cases. Between 35 percent and 50 percent of men with diabetes experience ED.

Many common medicines—including blood pressure drugs, appetite suppressants, antihistamines, antidepressants, tranquilizers, and cimetidine (an ulcer drug)—can produce ED as a side effect.

There is a risk that surgery (especially radical prostate and bladder surgery for cancer) can damage nerves and arteries near the penis, causing ED. Injury to the penis, spinal cord, prostate, bladder, and pelvis can lead to ED by harming nerves, smooth muscles, arteries, and fibrous tissues of the corpora cavernosa.

Psychological factors can lead to ED. Stress, anxiety, depression, guilt, low self-esteem, and fear of sexual failure cause 10 to 20 percent of ED cases. Men with a physical cause for ED frequently experience the same sort of psychological reactions (stress, anxiety, guilt, and depression).

Other possible causes are smoking, which affects blood flow in veins and arteries, and hormonal imbalances, such as low testosterone.

How Is ED Treated?

Most physicians suggest that treatments proceed from least to most invasive. The reduction of any medications with detrimental side effects is considered first. For example, drugs for high blood pressure work in a variety of ways. If you think a particular drug is causing problems with your erection, tell your pharmacist and ask whether you can try a different class of blood pressure medicine.

Medications for treating ED can be taken orally, injected directly into the penis, or inserted into the urethra at the tip of the penis. In March 1998, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved sildenafil citrate (Viagra), the first pill to treat ED. In August 2003, the FDA gave approval to a second oral medicine, vardenafil hydrochloride (Levitra). Addition-

al oral medicines are being tested for safety and effectiveness.

Medication Safety

Neither Viagra nor Levitra should be used more than once a day. Men who take nitrate-based drugs such as nitroglycerin for heart problems should not use either drug because the combination can cause a sudden drop in blood pressure. Also, Levitra should not be taken with any of the drugs called alpha-blockers, which are used to treat prostate enlargement or high blood pressure.

ED medications are among some of the most widely counterfeited drugs in the world. U.S. law defines counterfeit drugs as those sold under a product name without proper authorization. Counterfeiting can apply to both brand name and generic products, where the identity of the source is deliberately and fraudulently mislabeled in a way that suggests that it is the authentic approved product. Counterfeit products may include products without the active ingredient, with an insufficient quantity of the active ingredient, with the wrong active ingredient, or with fake packaging. The best way to avoid counterfeit drugs is to purchase prescription medicines at your community pharmacy from a reputable pharmacist whom you know.

Research on drugs for treating ED is rapidly progressing. Patients should ask their pharmacist about the latest advances. Since pharmacists typically see patients more than any other health care provider, they are a convenient resource for any health-related question and can impact your life in a very positive way. □

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