

What You Need to Know About Erectile Dysfunction

What is erectile dysfunction (ED)?

ED is when a man has trouble getting or keeping an erection that's firm enough to satisfy his sexual partner and himself.

Who gets ED?

Most men, regardless of their age, experience ED at some time in their lives.

What causes ED?

Occasional ED may be related to something as simple as fatigue, excess alcohol use, worry, or the ups and downs of a relationship. It can also be caused by "performance anxiety" because of previous problems with sexual function.

About 30 million men in the United States have ED repeatedly, as a chronic condition. For 66% of these men, ED is linked to other chronic conditions, including diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or obesity. For the other 34%, ED results from chronic depression, worry and anxiety, or certain medicines.

What will I need to tell my doctor to help find the cause of my ED?

You may feel embarrassed to talk with your doctor about such an intimate part of your life.

Remember that you're among millions of men who have similar problems, so your doctor has talked with many other men about ED.

Being aware of the questions your doctor will likely ask may help you give matter-of-fact answers. To prepare yourself for this conversation, think about:

Your Current Health and Medical History

- What medical conditions do you have now or in the past?
- Have you had any surgery or radiation therapy to your pelvic area?
- Do you have any urinary problems?
- What medicines are you taking every day and occasionally?

Your Emotional Health

- Has an important relationship changed recently?
- Has your sex life changed recently?
- In general, are you under a lot of stress?
- Do you have any psychological illnesses or depression?

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Your Habits

- How much do you smoke, drink alcohol, or take illicit drugs?

Your Erections

- Do you have erections? If yes, how firm are they? Is penetration difficult? Can you keep an erection after penetration?
- Do you have spontaneous erections during the night or in the morning?
- Do your erections change depending on your partner?
- Do your erections change with oral sex or when you masturbate?

Your Sexual Satisfaction

- Do you have difficulties with sexual desire, arousal, ejaculation, or orgasm?
- Do you have any pain with ejaculation?
- How does this problem affect your sexual satisfaction, your confidence, or your relationship?

Your doctor will likely also ask you to fill out a questionnaire about your relationships and overall well-being.

What will my doctor do to check me out besides ask questions?

Your doctor will check your weight, blood pressure, and other characteristics that could indicate changes in hormones that affect sexual performance.

You'll give a blood sample to look for other causes of ED, such as anemia, diabetes, high cholesterol, low testosterone, or thyroid problems.

Is there anything I can do on my own to help?

Maybe. A healthy diet, regular exercise, and adequate sleep can improve sexual function in many men. These habits may help by improving blood circulation and heart health.

Eating certain foods may also improve circulation:

- Broccoli, cauliflower, root vegetables, spinach, and other foods high in nitrates
- Blueberries, broccoli, chocolate, red grapes, tea, and other foods rich in flavonoids
- Berries, broccoli, red and black beans, spinach, sweet potatoes, and other foods high in antioxidants
- Asparagus, chili powder, grapefruit, tomatoes (especially cooked), watermelon, and other foods high in lycopene

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You may also be able to reduce ED by choosing healthy habits instead of unhealthy ones -- especially habits that cause poor blood circulation. You need healthy circulation for your penis to become erect. Your sex life may improve when you quit cigarette smoking, drink less alcohol, and do not use illicit drugs

What kind of help can I get for the emotional causes of ED?

Depending on the underlying cause of your ED, a variety of safe and effective treatments are available, including talk therapy and prescription medicines for depression, anxiety, stress, and other psychosocial causes.

What are my options if a medicine I take is causing ED?

Your doctor will work with you to adjust the dose or find another medicine or treatment.

What treatments help with ED?

- Testosterone replacement via patch, gel, tablet, injection, or pellet
- Pills that improve circulation to the penis when it is stimulated
- Medicine you inject directly into your penis with a small needle
- Medicine you insert into your urethra, through a suppository
- A vacuum erection device that pulls blood into your penis, leading to an erection
- Penile implants

Your doctor will help you decide which treatment is best for you. It may take several tries to find the one that's right; in some cases a combination of approaches works best.