

# ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION IN MEN WITH DEPRESSION

SOURCE: CANADIAN MALE SEXUAL HEALTH COUNCIL

Depression, a medical condition that can rob a person of the ability to experience many of life's pleasures, can also be associated with erectile dysfunction (ED). In men with depression, ED can be caused by the depression itself or the medications used to treat it. ED can cause loss of self-esteem, poor self-image, anxiety, additional depression, as well as significant personal and emotional stress, that affects all aspects of the lives of these men and their partners.

Almost all ED is treatable. Yet, many men are embarrassed to talk to their physician about ED. It may surprise some to learn that most Canadian family physicians have prescribed an ED treatment, reflecting their willingness and ability to diagnose and treat this condition. It also shows that men are not alone in their concern about ED.

## How does an erection occur?

For normal erections to occur, one must have interplay among healthy nerves and blood vessels, male hormones, especially testosterone, and a normal sexual interest. There are two main ways that sexual stimulation can cause an erection. One is the result of central stimulation - the brain responds to appropriate cues and sends messages down the spinal cord to the nerves in the pelvis. The other is a result of genital stimulation, which creates a reflex action in the spinal cord through the nerves running beside the prostate and into the penis. However, the messages start, the nerves involved in an erection control the release of special chemicals called neurotransmitters in the tissues of the penis. These chemicals cause the penile blood vessels to dilate

(allowing more blood to flow into the penis) which increases its size and firmness - producing an erection. The erection will fade away when the signals decrease, or new signals are sent to actively cancel it (as happens after an orgasm).

## What is ED?

ED is typically defined as the persistent inability to attain and/or maintain an erection that is satisfactory for sexual performance. The easiest to recognize, of course is complete ED, which is the inability to achieve an erection in any circumstance. But ED is more precisely a condition that occurs in various degrees. In fact, most men with ED have mild to moderate ED, which can be defined as intermittent and/or increasing loss of penile rigidity with an associated impact on sexual activity. Regardless of its degree of severity, ED is a legitimate, treatable concern.

## How is ED associated with depression?

Depression, a disease that affects up to eight percent of men at some point in their lives, is caused by an imbalance in naturally occurring hormones and other chemicals in the brain and blood circulation. This imbalance can contribute to ED.

Some of the medications used to treat depression may also cause ED. These medications may include Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs), Monoamine Oxidase Inhibitors (MAOIs) and Tricyclic Antidepressants (TCAs). Unfortunately, while these medications have a positive effect on





depression, they may have a negative effect on the part of the brain that controls normal sexual function.

It is very important that you take the anti-depressant and/or any other medications prescribed for your depression because this condition can be life-threatening. Often, effective treatment of depression results in improved sexual function and vice versa, effective treatment of ED may help recovery from depression.

### **What you can do:**

While overcoming depression can be a slow and difficult task, your road to recovery does not have to be complicated by ED. Most ED, regardless of this cause, severity, or age of the man can be treated safely and effectively.

We encourage you to discuss ED with a healthcare professional, just as you would any other aspect of your health, including depression.

Importantly, if you have not already talked about this concern with your partner, consider doing it now. Your partner has likely already noticed that something has changed in your sexual relationship. Both of you need to know that this may not be from any loss of interest in sexual activity with your partner or desire for intimacy but likely from the ED. If you both feel that sexual intercourse is a part of your life together that needs to be maintained or restored, you will be glad to know that there are safe and effective treatments available.

### **What your healthcare professional will do:**

Your healthcare professional will want you to describe your ED to them. Questions like how long it has been present, how severe it is, and whether it has affected your relationship with your partner, will likely be asked. A brief physical examination will usually need to be done and blood tests may be required.

ED may also be associated with other risk factors, including smoking, excess alcohol use, obesity and underlying medical conditions that interfere with, or damage, healthy nerves, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, and diabetes. For this reason, it is important that men with ED seek the advice of their physician - a physician will want to address any other factors involved.

ED associated with depression and/or antidepressants may last only a few days or weeks. If you have been taking medical treatment for depression, and your mood is stable, but ED persists, your physician may consider several options, such as decreasing the dose of your antidepressant, changing the type of antidepressant, or combining lower doses of two antidepressants.

### **ED treatment choices:**

Should you and your physician decide to treat your ED, safe and effective treatments are available:

- An oral tablet (sildenafil- VIAGRA\*) works with the body's own signaling pathways by stopping the rapid breakdown of chemicals needed to open the blood vessels in the penis, thus allowing an





erection to develop and be maintained naturally. Viagra is the only effective ED treatment available in an easy to take tablet.

- For virtually all men, Viagra is safe, regardless of any underlying medical condition. Viagra is safe for most men being treated for cardiovascular disease. The only men who cannot be offered Viagra are those who need or use nitro glycerin or nitrate therapy.

For most Canadian adults, sexual health is an important part of their overall well-being. In fact, most men and women expect to enjoy a healthy sexual relationship, including the option of sexual intercourse, well into their older years. Men who receive effective treatment for ED are usually thrilled with their improved sexual activity.

The following options are medical devices or medications that act directly on the penis. Unlike Viagra, these treatments do not require sexual stimulation to produce an erection:

- Transurethral therapy (alprostadil) involves delivery of a small suppository into the tip of the opening of the penis, creating an erection
- Vacuum therapy involves the use of a vacuum constriction device to draw blood into the penis, causing an erection that is maintained by a constriction band placed at the base of the penis
- Penile injection therapy involves injection of a drug or a mixture of drugs directly into the penis, creating an erection
- Surgical implants are used infrequently today, especially for ED associated with depression

Counselling to discuss underlying issues that may be contributing to ED may be helpful. Counselling may involve your partner. If ED persists, your physician may request a careful sexual history, perhaps including questions about your pre depression and/or pre-treatment sexual function.

