

Sexual health

Diabetes and male sexuality

What is impotence?

Erectile dysfunction (impotence) means that a man is not able to have an erection firm enough, or cannot maintain it for long enough, to have successful sexual intercourse.

Short episodes of impotence are common. In certain situations, such as in times of stress or after drinking too much alcohol, most men will experience temporary impotence. Impotence does not mean a man is infertile.

How does impotence occur?

Impotence can be caused by physical or psychological factors, or a combination of the two.

Impotence may result from damage to the nerves or the blood vessels that control blood flow to the penis. Hormone problems also can cause physical impotence. Occasionally, impotence is a side effect of medication, particularly medication for high blood pressure or depression.

Impotence can also be caused by fear, stress, worry, anger or frustration. Often, this type of impotence develops from 'performance anxiety' – a man's fear that he won't perform well during sexual intercourse. Stress caused by problems at work, by strains in a marriage, or by financial difficulties can lead to this type of impotence. Drinking too much alcohol may also cause temporary impotence.

How does diabetes cause impotence?

No one knows for sure what causes impotence in men with diabetes, but doctors suggest several possibilities. According to some experts the nerves or blood vessels that control the flow of blood to the penis may become permanently damaged as a result of diabetes. A normal erection depends on healthy nerves and a good blood supply. Damage can lead to impotence. Nerve damage (neuropathy) and damaged blood vessels are believed to be the most frequent cause of impotence in men with diabetes.

This usually occurs after having diabetes for a number of years, but sometimes impotence is seen earlier in some individuals.

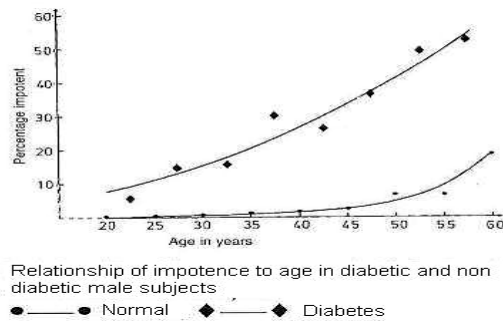
Many doctors believe that impotence may be delayed, or avoided, or possibly corrected by controlling blood glucose levels. Your health professionals will help you achieve the diet, medication, and exercise plan that is right for you.



Treatment of impotence

The first step is for the man and his partner to discuss the situation and decide that they both want to do something about it. The next step is to book a long consultation with the doctor.

The doctor may identify that some medication may be responsible and suggest a change. Usually the impotence is a result of the combination of age and diabetes (Figure1).



Psychological

If your impotence is psychological, talking about your anger, your fears, your worries and your problems can help. Your partner, your physician, or your health worker can help you work out your problems.

Sex therapy and counselling are also available. Counselling can be successful, particularly when both sexual partners participate. For some men with diabetes, impotence may disappear when they learn that there are no physical reasons for the impotence.

Physical

Treatment for impotence is available, depending on the cause of impotence. Careful management and control of your diabetes may reduce problems with impotence.

Impotence in diabetes is not related to insulin and oral diabetes tablets. It is important not to reduce or change any medication without first consulting a doctor.

Impotence caused by hormone problems can sometimes be treated with medication. Your doctor may check the level of sex hormones in the blood. If impotence is a side effect of other medications, your doctor may be able to prescribe alternative drugs.



Treatment of impotence due to blood vessel or nerve damage

Impotence that results from permanent damage to the blood vessels or nerves can also be treated. Thousands of men with diabetes have been helped by penile medications or penile implants. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist (urologist) for further advice.

Tablets

Viagra (sildenafil) works by relaxing the blood vessels in the penis during sexual excitement. This allows blood to flow to the penis and an erection to happen in a normal way. Because Viagra may also open other vessels, it can cause effects in other areas (eg skin flushing). It should not be used by men who are taking other medications that dilate blood vessels (eg nitrates for angina).

Penile Medications*

Nowadays there are special medications, prostaglandins which relax the muscles of the blood vessels and let blood flow into the penis causing an erection (Caverject an injection, Muse a pellet which is inserted into the urethra). Although men worry about the process it is usually not painful. The medications are often effective and men use them on many occasions without any side effects. It's easy to learn how to use them from a GP.

* Viagra is not on PBS but may be available to veterans.

You can get help

Remember to talk about any problems with your partner, your physician or health care worker.

Information about contraception, genetic counselling and pregnancy is freely available. You should discuss these issues with your doctor as necessary and request further information or counselling if required.

- > diabetes can affect your sexual health
- > help is available from your health professionals

The Impotence Australia website is:

www.impotenceaustralia.com.au, ph: 1800 800 614

For more information

Diabetes Outreach

8 Woodville Rd

Woodville South SA 5011

Telephone: (08) 8222 6775

www.diabetesoutreach.org.au