

Viagra-Vation: Erection Medications May Cause Relationship Strife

By Michael Castleman

Summary

Erection drugs increase the likelihood of erection. But they do nothing to resolve the relationship issues that often contribute to—or may be the major cause—of erectile dysfunction (ED).

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Back in 1998, the little blue, diamond-shaped pill, Viagra, took the world by storm. During the first month after the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved it, doctors wrote almost 300,000 prescriptions, and the drug's sales topped \$96 million, making it the biggest launch of a new drug in history. Sales of Viagra and the other erection drugs (Cialis and Levitra) are now more than \$2 billion a year.

Erection Insurance

If you ask the people who developed Viagra, the drug was designed to help the 10 percent of men who cannot raise erections because of diabetes, other illnesses, and the sexual side effects of other drugs, notably antidepressants. But the rush to Viagra and the other drugs came primarily from men who did not have these problems, men who wanted “erection insurance,” greater confidence that when the clothes came off they'd be able to get it up.

Erection insurance appeals to millions of men. According to the Massachusetts Male Aging Study (1994), fewer than half of men over 40 (48 percent) reported “no difficulties at all” with erection. Seventeen percent admitted “occasional”

problems. One-quarter said they had “frequent difficulty.” And 10 percent said they could “not raise an erection at all.”

The majority of the 42 percent of men who can get it up, but have occasional or frequent erection difficulties are regular guys who experience normal, age-related erection changes. After 40, most men gradually lose the ability to raise an erection just from sexual fantasy or the sight of an erotically dressed—or undressed—lover. They find they need direct penile stimulation by hand, mouth, or sex toy. In addition, compared with the rock-solid erections of men's youth, post-40 erections tend to be less firm and less persistent without ongoing fondling. If men don't understand that such changes are natural and do not signal a sex problem, they often assume that they have one. Many of these men have viewed Viagra as a godsend. Even if a man over 40 knows that his erection changes are natural and not a sex problem, erection medication can be reassuring. It takes the worry out of being close. Or does it?

No Panacea

Erection drugs are not erection panaceas. They do not produce erection all by themselves. Rather, they strengthen the penis' ability to respond to erotic signals. If a man is not in the mood for sex, or is turned off to his lover or their relationship, the drugs don't do much. Even when conditions are right, the drugs still only work about 70 percent of the time.

Erection medications may also cause side effects: headache, nasal congestion, indigestion, facial flushing, blurred vision, and in rare cases, more serious vision problems.

Then there's the far more serious problem of the erection drugs' interaction with nitrate medications (nitroglycerin for angina, and the party drug amyl nitrate or “poppers”). If a man taking nitrate medication takes an erection drug, the combination can prove *fatal*. This combination can cause a precipitous drop in blood pressure, leading to life-threatening shock. The interaction of nitrates and erection drugs is particularly troubling because heart disease is a significant risk factor for erection impairment, so men taking nitrates for the former would tend to gravitate to erection drugs for the latter.

Viagra-Vation

Even when it works, Viagra & Co. often cause as many problems as they solve. “Viagra-vation” is the term coined to describe the relationship problems that often

result when a man with erection impairment can suddenly produce a pharmaceutical erection. “Viagra can create erections,” says Marty Klein, Ph.D., a sex and marital therapist in Palo Alto, California, “but it can’t fix problems that aren’t erection problems. In my 20-plus years of treating impotence, I’ve seen very few pure erection problems. But I’ve seen lots of erection difficulties compounded by guilt, shame, anger, anxiety, violence, alcoholism, drug abuse, religious differences, and relationship problems. Even if erection drugs restore lost erections, they can’t resolve the other problems that are usually the cause of the erection trouble.”

Men and Women See Erection Problems Differently

Men tend to view erection impairment as a mechanical problem, and drugs as a quick fix. Women tend to view erection difficulties as an emotional issue, and want to work on the couple’s intimacy—or lack of it—before they feel comfortable attempting intercourse again. Erection problems are a drag, but a surprisingly large number of couples adapt, especially those who have intimacy issues. Lack of erection means they don’t have to deal with their intimacy issues or struggle over sexual frequency. However, when drugs change the sexual equilibrium in the relationship, instead of being a solution, these medications may aggravate underlying relationship problems.

Enhancing Intimacy

So how do you deepen the intimacy in your relationship? First, it’s critical to understand that these issues are important, that after 40, it’s difficult for men to enjoy good sex without feeling emotionally close to the woman and trusting her, no matter what’s up with his penis, with or without erection drugs. If aloofness, anger, or other emotional issues have dimmed the erotic spark in your relationship, it might be a good idea to consult a couples therapist or sex therapist before you ask for that prescription. To find a sex therapist near you, visit the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists www.aasect.org.

If things are fine between you, but you’re out of erotic practice because of an erection problem, consider giving each other whole-body massages or experimenting with sex toys or other erotic enhancements. Eroticism grows from mutual attraction and shared sensuality, a heightening of all five senses that excites you and your lover. Massage products and sex toys enhance sensuality. They also slow sex down, which most women enjoy, and which also helps men over 40 become aroused enough to raise erections.

Use Lubricant

Once women are in their 40s, many develop menopause-related vaginal dryness. If a couple hasn't had intercourse in a while and then erection drugs make it possible again, without a lubricant, the woman may suffer vaginal irritation and soreness. Use a lubricant. They're available at pharmacies. Vegetable oil also works (but may stain bed linens).

There's More to Enjoyable Sex Than Erection

Within a year after Viagra's approval, prescription refills fell below analysts' expectations. The same is true for Cialis and Levitra. That's actually good news. Erection medications can be a boon to some men and couples. But there's more to great sex than erection. People seem to be figuring that out.

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