

Nutrition and Erectile Dysfunction

Have you ever wondered why there seem to be so many advertisements for erectile dysfunction (ED) medication - Viagra, Cialis, and Levitra - on television and in the magazines you are reading? I did, and began an investigation that would ultimately become my Doctoral dissertation. The reason is quite simple – there is a lot of erectile dysfunction (ED). Over 30 million men in the United States suffer from it. ED affects over 50% of men between the ages of 40 and 70 and the incidence of complete ED triples between those ages. Even more disconcerting, experts expect cases of ED to more than double over the next 25 years.

Erectile dysfunction imposes significant social costs. It impacts a man's satisfaction with his life and his relationship with others. Studies show that sexual intimacy is desired by older adults. A study in 29 countries consisting of 27,000 men and women aged 40 to 80 found less than 20% of the respondents agreed with the statement “older people no longer want sex”. Due to the rising incidence of erectile dysfunction many couples will not be able to enjoy healthy sexual relations in their later years.

Why is erectile dysfunction on the rise? Many researchers, including this author, believe it is a direct result of poor dietary habits and lifestyle choices. For many years it was thought that ED was mostly psychological, but recent studies have shown that over 80% of ED is due to physical causes. For the erectile process to function correctly several systems of the body need to be healthy – blood needs to be flowing smoothly and unobstructed throughout the body, nerves need to be firing and sending messages between the brain and the relevant body parts, and libido needs to be present to encourage sexual interest. All of these systems require proper nutrition to correctly function.

To better understand the causes of ED we can look at the scientifically documented risk factors. Risk factors related to lifestyle choices include alcohol consumption, diet, hormone levels, inflammation, obesity, sedentary (lack of exercise) lifestyle, cholesterol levels, use of prescription drugs, tobacco smoking, stress, and (yes) motorcycling. There is also a strong association between ED and the medical diagnoses of depression, atherosclerosis, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, metabolic syndrome, diabetes, and lower urinary tract symptoms (LUTS). Studies show that most men with ED suffer from these conditions which are often a direct result of the same lifestyle choice risk factors previously listed. In fact, the connection has been made that ED is often a warning sign for cardiovascular disease.

So, how is this all related to diet and nutrition? For the body to operate optimally it needs the right nutrients. Many studies have shown the connection between a poor diet and all the risk factors and conditions listed above. Diets that are high in sugars, refined grains, processed meat and dairy; while low in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and healthy fats produce these conditions. Once men are placed on healthier diets, their symptoms of ED are reduced and often completely eliminated. Through proper nutrition, regular exercise, and sometimes with the help of specific supplements proper erectile functioning can be restored.

Many people will ask, “What’s wrong with using medications”? My answer is while the medications will work in most cases, there are side effects, some of which can be quite dangerous. But even more important, the medication is not repairing the underlying condition. Erectile dysfunction is your body telling you that something is not quite right and needs your attention. It is your warning sign to take action before a more serious or life threatening event occurs.

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