

Sex and Diabetes

By Michael Castleman

There are two sexual myths of diabetes: Men with the disease are fated to suffer erectile dysfunction (ED). And diabetic women suffer few, if any, sexual effects. Both are wrong. Diabetes can impair sexual function in both men and women. But people with diabetes can also enjoy great sex.

Sex Problems In Diabetic Men

Almost as soon as men get diagnosed with diabetes, they begin hearing dire warnings about their risk of ED. In a classic case of self-fulfilling prophecy, the anxiety this engenders can cause the problem. Diabetes may, indeed, impair erection. But ED is by no means inevitable, and if it occurs, several safe, effective treatments are available. With the right treatment, any man with diabetes can enjoy satisfying sex despite his medical condition.

Syracuse University researchers reviewed 23 studies of ED in diabetic men. Their conclusion: About 30 percent suffer severe problems. That's about twice the risk of nondiabetic men, but this research shows that 70 percent of diabetic men *do not* develop severe ED.

Risk Factors For Diabetic ED

- Poorly controlled blood sugar (glucose). Poor blood glucose control increases risk for all diabetes complications, including the two most responsible for diabetic ED: cardiovascular disease and nerve damage (neuropathy).

Cardiovascular disease involves the development of cholesterol-rich deposits (plaques) inside the arteries, which narrows them and reduces blood flow. When the arteries that nourish the heart narrow, the result is heart disease. When the arteries that carry blood into the penis narrow, the result is ED.

Neuropathy is never damage. Over time, many diabetics develop peripheral neuropathy—numbness, tingling, or pain in the extremities. But neuropathy can also develop in the nerves involved in erection. When this happens, the result is ED.

- Duration of diabetes. The longer you've had the disease, the greater your risk. Cardiovascular disease and neuropathy develop over time.
- Other diabetic complications. Men who experienced other complications are more likely to suffer erection problems.
- High blood pressure and/or use of blood pressure medication. High blood pressure damages the arteries. Many blood pressure medications cause erection impairment as a side effect.
- Being overweight. It's associated with high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.
- Smoking. It accelerates the development of cardiovascular disease.

Prevention of Diabetic ED

The most effective way to prevent diabetic ED is to practice tight control of your blood sugar. Test many times a day. Regulate your drugs and/or insulin in consultation with your physician and/or endocrinologist. If you're not familiar with tight control, consult a certified diabetes educator. Find one through the nearest chapter of the American Diabetes Association.

Treatment of Diabetic ED

If you suffer diabetic ED, don't despair. Today, numerous treatment options can help you regain your lost erection, and enjoy sex despite diabetes.

- First, see your doctor. Tighter control may help. Doctors can also prescribe erection medication, which may help if the cause of your problem is cardiovascular.
- Next, consult a sex therapist. Compared with doctors, sex therapists are generally better informed about all the possible causes of erection

impairment, including its psychological dimensions, among them, stress, depression, relationship problems. Sex therapy enjoys considerable success helping diabetic men. The therapist works with both partners, teaching the couple to adopt a more communicative, more sensual, whole-body, massage-oriented approach to lovemaking. Treatment typically takes several months of weekly or biweekly sessions. Ask your physician for a referral or contact the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT) at www.aasect.org. Click the map of the U.S. and Canada, and get a list of all the AASECT-certified sex therapists in your state or province. Sex therapy usually costs about \$100 to \$150 an hour. Health insurance may or may not cover it. Check your policy.

- Vacuum devices. These devices create a vacuum around the penis that coaxes extra blood into the organ, resulting in temporary erection. Models differ, but all include a plastic tube that fits over the penis, fitted with a pump typically operated using a squeeze bulb. The user squeezes the bulb, which evacuates the air from the plastic tube, drawing blood into the penis. Once the man raises an erection, he slips a rubber ring over his erection to compress the veins that drain blood from the penis. This helps maintain the erection. One study evaluated the effectiveness of vacuum constricting devices in 21 men—six with diabetes. Seventeen (81 percent) reported full erections or semi-erections sufficient for intercourse. Two kinds of vacuum devices are available, penis pumps available from sex toy marketers and prescription devices custom fitted to the individual. Prescription devices are more effective. If you're interested in one, talk to your doctor.
- Enjoy lovemaking without erection. Our sexual culture is extremely erection-focused. But there are wonderfully fulfilling ways to make love without an erection. Erection is not necessary for orgasm. Men with severe ED can still enjoy marvelous orgasms from vigorous hand massage or the penis, or oral sex, or use of sex toys.

Sex Problems in Diabetic Women

So little is written about the effects of diabetes on women's sexuality that you'd think the disease has none. But it does. The effects in women are more subtle than those in men. Nonetheless, they are quite real, and deserve more attention than they receive.

The main problem is loss of vaginal lubrication. You need healthy blood flow into the vaginal wall to produce natural vaginal lubrication. Just as cardiovascular disease reduces blood flow into the penis, it does the same to blood flow into the vaginal wall. The solution is a commercial lubricant.

Neuropathy in diabetic women can reduce clitoral responsiveness to erotic touch, impairing a woman's ability to enjoy orgasm. A lubricant can also help with this problem. Sexual lubricants increase sensitivity to touch, and can help compensate for neuropathy.

Another way to increase stimulation of the clitoris, the vagina, and anywhere else you enjoy being caressed is to use a vibrator. The sex toy store affiliated with this site, mypleasure.com, sells several.

Help

For individualized help coping with the sexual impact of diabetes, consult a sex therapist. To find one near you, visit aasect.org, the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists, or sstarnet.org, the Society for Sex Therapy and Research.

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