

## **Healthy Lifestyle Preserves Sexual Function In Men Over 45**

*By Michael Castleman*

### **Summary**

Studies show that men's risk of sex problems increases with age, smoking, alcohol, obesity, diabetes, high-fat diet, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, lack of exercise, and time spent watching TV. You can't do anything about your age. But you can work to improve your lifestyle. In addition to general health benefits, embracing a healthy lifestyle also preserves and enhances sexual function.

1,300 words MORE...

## **Healthy Lifestyle Preserves Sexual Function In Men Over 45**

Erection pills come in handy—for men who need them and can use them safely. But there's a downside. America is a pill-loving culture, and as soon as a pill appears for any ill, many people think: That's the way to go, the best way, the only way. When it comes to sexual function, that's a mistake. While some men need erection medication, those who commit to a healthy lifestyle may be able to postpone, or even avoid drugs.

### **Not Just Age: Lifestyle Is Critical**

Harvard researchers recently analyzed data on lifestyle and sexual function in a large group of men (31,742 men age 53 to 90) whose health and lifestyle have been carefully assessed every two years since 1986. The men's risk of sexual difficulties (lack of desire, arousal difficulties, erection problems, orgasm/ejaculation impairment, and overall satisfaction) rose significantly with age, with one-third of the men reporting some erection impairment.

But erection difficulties were strongly correlated to smoking, heavy drinking, obesity, lack of exercise, and time spent watching TV.

## **If It's Good for Health, It's Good for Sex**

Perhaps you've heard of "cross training," the idea that any exercise helps performance in other forms of exercise. Sex is a form of exercise, albeit, a rather modest workout. But a body that's in decent physical shape is better conditioned for sex than one that isn't. So anything that's good for health in general is good for sex.

Before you ask your doctor for a prescription for erection medication, embrace a healthy lifestyle and you might not need it:

- Don't smoke.
- Eat a low-fat diet: less meat, less whole-milk dairy, fewer rich desserts.
- Eat more fruits and vegetables, at least five servings a day.
- Get regular exercise, at least the equivalent of a half-hour walk a day.
- Don't have more than two alcoholic drinks a day. (A "drink" is one 12-ounce beer, one shot of 80-proof spirits, or five ounces of wine, a standard wine glass about half full).

## **The Nervous and Cardiovascular Systems**

In both men and women, sexual response depends on the interaction of the nervous and cardiovascular (heart and circulatory) systems. Sexual stimuli trigger reactions in the nervous system that open the arteries in the genital area, allowing greater inflow of blood. In men, this produces erection. In women, it causes vaginal lubrication, the parting of the vaginal lips, and clitoral erection. If your nervous system is not functioning properly, the nerve impulses that trigger sexual response can't do their job. Meanwhile, if your cardiovascular system is not functioning properly, the flow of extra blood into the genital area becomes impaired, and penile and clitoral erection and vaginal lubrication suffer. In other words, good sex depends on keeping your nervous and cardiovascular systems healthy.

## **Fight Free Radicals**

Smoking and high-fat diet are hell on the cardiovascular system. They fill the bloodstream with harmful oxygen ions known as "free radicals." Nasty free radicals injure the sensitive cells that line artery walls. Once the arterial lining becomes injured—which starts happens to most Americans in childhood—the body mounts a defensive reaction, and the injury sites scab over.

But if large numbers of free radicals continue to circulate in the bloodstream—from continued smoking or a diet heavy on fast food and junk food—fatty, cholesterol-rich deposits known as “plaques” begin to collect around the tiny scabs covering arterial injury sites. Over time, these plaques grow larger in a process called “atherosclerosis.” After several decades, atherosclerotic plaques can grow large enough to partially block blood flow through affected arteries. When plaques severely narrow the arteries that nourish the heart, the result is heart disease: angina, heart attack, or congestive heart failure. In the brain, this process causes most strokes. And in the genitals, it can cause erection impairment in men, and loss of vaginal lubrication and clitoral sensitivity in women. Several studies show that compared with the general population, smokers have more sex problems and report less sexual satisfaction. Other studies show that as cholesterol levels increase, so does risk of erection impairment.

## **Help From Fruits and Vegetables**

Fortunately, we're by no means defenseless against the health-damaging, sex-killing onslaught of free radicals. The harm they cause can be largely prevented with certain nutrients, antioxidants, notably vitamins A, C, and E, and several minerals, notably selenium and zinc. (Vitamin A is actually a family of about 600 different compounds, all known as carotenoids, the best-known of which is beta-carotene.) Antioxidant supplements can help, but nutritionists and public health officials agree that the best way to get antioxidants is directly from foods rich in them: fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains. That's why the American Heart Association and the National Cancer Institute urge Americans to eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. Many, many studies show that as fruit and vegetable consumption increases, risk of heart disease and every major cancer decreases. There have been no big studies of dietary antioxidants and sexual satisfaction, but the link is biologically clear: The more antioxidants you consume, the less atherosclerosis you're likely to have, which means better blood flow through your arteries, and more blood available to flow into your genitals when sexual stimuli cause arousal.

## **Quit Smoking**

No one should smoke, and if you smoke, talk with your doctor about quitting. But studies show that even among smokers, those whose diets contain the most fruits and vegetables suffer the fewest smoking-related illnesses—less heart disease and less lung cancer.

## **Get Regular Exercise**

Exercise also helps keep your cardiovascular system in shape. A study at UCLA showed that as people become more physically fit they also become more sexually active. They have more energy, including sexual energy, and they feel better about themselves, which makes them appear more attractive to others.

## **Fewer Pounds, Better Sex**

The combination of regular exercise and a low-fat diet rich in antioxidants is also the foundation of successful weight-control programs. Many people who are heavy have very active and pleasurable sex lives. But studies at the Duke University Diet and Fitness Center have shown that as people lose weight and become more physically active, they usually report greater sexual interest and enjoyment. Again, weight loss typically produces more energy because you have less weight to carry around, and this includes more sexual energy.

## **A Leading Sex-Killer: Alcohol**

The best way to keep your nerves in good condition for great sex is to steer clear of excess alcohol. As Shakespeare wrote in *Macbeth*, alcohol “provokes the desire, but takes away the performance.” Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant. One drink helps people relax and function socially. But beyond two drinks at one sitting, the nerves in your genitals get plastered and can't function. Alcohol is undoubtedly the world's leading cause of sexual impairment.

## **Avoid Type-2 Diabetes**

A less obvious cause of nerve damage that can interfere with sex is type 2 diabetes (what used to be called “adult onset,” the kind that usually does not require insulin injections). This disease is an epidemic, affecting an estimated 20 million Americans. It is caused by the combination of obesity and a sedentary lifestyle. Diabetes often causes nerve damage—including damage to the nerves involved in sexual response and enjoyment.

Bottom line: If you spend a good deal of your free time munching on junk food while watching TV, you're on a one-way ride to sexual impairment. But if you get off the sofa, take walks, and replace the chips and Big Macs with salads and fruit snacks, you're on your way to not only becoming healthier, but also more sexually fulfilled.

## References:

- Bartolotti, A et al. "The Epidemiology of Erectile Dysfunction and Its Risk Factors," *International Journal of Andrology* (1997) 20:323.
- Chung, WS et al. "Is Obesity an Underlying Factor in Erectile Dysfunction?" *European Urology* (1999) 36:68
- Derby, CA et al. "Modifiable Risk Factors and Erectile Dysfunction: Can Lifestyle Changes Modify Risk?" *Urology* (2000) 56:302.
- Jancin, B. "Coronary Risk Factors Flag Future Erectile Woes," *Family Practice News*, 9-1-2003.
- Jensen, J et al. "The Prevalence and Etiology of Impotence in 101 Male Hypertensive Outpatients," *American Journal of Hypertension* (1999) 12:271.
- Johannes, CB et al. "Incidence of Erectile Dysfunction in Men 40 to 69 Years Old: Longitudinal Results from the Massachusetts Male Aging Study," *Journal of Urology* (2000) 163:460.
- Kim, SC. "Hyperlipidemia and Erectile Dysfunction," *Asian Journal of Andrology* (2000) 2:161.
- Levin, S. "Does Exercise Enhance Sexuality?" *The Physician and Sportsmedicine*. March 1993, p. 199.
- Mann, D. "Weight Loss Linked to Improved Sex Life," *Medical Tribune* 5-12-1997.
- Mannino, DM et al. "Cigarette Smoking: An Independent Risk Factor for Impotence?" *American Journal of Epidemiology* (1994) 140:1003.
- Spangler, JG et al. "Smoking, Hypertension, and Erectile Dysfunction," *Journal of Family Practice* (2001) 50:73.
- Wei, M et al. "Total Cholesterol and HDL Cholesterol as Important Predictors of Erectile Dysfunction," *American Journal of Epidemiology* (1994) 140:930.

White, JR. et al. "Enhanced Sexual Behavior in Exercising Men," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (1990) 19:193.

Wuh, H. *Sexual Fitness*. Putnam, NY, 2001.