

If You're Not Careful, Erection Drugs Might Kill You

By Michael Castleman

Summary

As prescription drugs go, the drugs prescribed to treat erectile dysfunction (Viagra, Levitra, and Cialis) are fairly safe. But in combination with nitrate drugs, particularly nitroglycerin, used to treat angina, or the party drug amyl nitrate (“poppers”) erection medications may cause a life-threatening drop in blood pressure. There have been more than 500 deaths. Other erection medications: Caverjet, MUSE, and Yocon (yohimbine) are safe.

500 words MORE...

If You're Not Careful, Erection Drugs Might Kill You

Since it was introduced in 1998, the erection pill, Viagra (sildenafil) has revolutionized the way doctors treat erectile dysfunction. But almost from the day it was approved, reports of deaths shortly after taking the drug have tarnished the erection pill's luster and raised troubling questions about this medication.

The Big No-No: Nitrate Medication for Heart Disease

Viagra—and the two other drugs in its class, Levitra (vardenafil) and Cialis (tadalafil)—can be fatal when used by men with heart disease. The risk of Viagra-related death increases for men with heart disease who use the drug while also using nitrate medications, for example, nitroglycerin, a standard treatment for the chest pain of angina. This combination of erection drugs and nitrate medication can cause a precipitous drop in blood pressure, leading to life-threatening shock.

At last count, more than 500 men have died while taking Viagra.

The first 50 deaths garnered headlines, and eight months after it approved the drug, the Food and Drug Administration required Viagra's manufacturer, Pfizer, to

update its label, warning of possible fatality if the drug is taken by men using nitrate drugs.

Is It The Drug Or The Heart Disease?

Sexual activity does not place great strain on the heart. Sex is about as strenuous as walking up one flight of stairs. But in men with serious heart disease, it might stress the heart enough to trigger heart attack.

Viagra, Levitra, and Cialis are the most popular erection medications, but they are not the only ones. The others include: Caverjet (alprostadil), which is injected into the penis; MUSE (alprostadil), inserted into the urethra; and Yocon (yohimbine), made from an extract of the bark of the African yohimbe tree, a traditional herbal aphrodisiac.

Researchers at the University of California, San Francisco, figured that if underlying heart disease were the main problem with erection medication, the other drugs should cause about as many problems as Viagra. But that is not the case. According to a report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*:

Caverjet: Approximately 1.3 million prescriptions through July 1999. 5 known deaths. 4.5 deaths per million prescriptions.

MUSE: Approximately 1.3 million prescriptions. 2 known deaths. 1.5 deaths per million prescriptions.

Yocon: Approximately 4 million prescriptions. 1 known death. 0.25 deaths per million prescriptions.

Viagra: Approximately 11 million prescriptions. 564 known deaths. 49 deaths per million prescriptions.

In other words, the death rate from Viagra is 9.8 times higher than Caverjet's, 33 times higher than MUSE's, and a whopping 196 times higher than Yocon's.

These figures strongly suggest that while underlying heart disease may play some role in erection-drug deaths, Viagra—and Levitra and Cialis—appear to be inherently more hazardous than any competitor medication.

Poppers

Erection medications should also not be used by men taking the recreational drug amyl nitrate, popularly known as poppers. This party drug produces a rush of physical excitement and feelings of clarity and power. But it's also a nitrate. If a man mixes erection medication and poppers, he risks death.

References:

Ishikura, F et al. "Effects of Sildenafil Citrate (Viagra) Combined with Nitrate on the Heart," *Circulation* (2000) 102:2516.

Mika, M. "Some Men Who Take Viagra Die: Why?" *Journal of the American Medical Association* (2000) 283:590.

Mobley, DF and NH Baum. "What You Need to Know Before Prescribing Viagra," *Hospital Medicine*, 5-1999, p. 20.