

Erection Myths—And The Truth About Erections

By Michael Castleman

Summary

Common myths about erection that harm men:

- Erection is something men “achieve.”
- Sex is a performance.
- Men are sex machines, always ready, always hard.
- During sex, you get only one chance at erection. If it wilts, sex is over, and you’re a failure.
- I blew it last time. I’ll never get it up again.
- When I can’t get hard, she says it doesn’t matter. She’s lying.
- If a man can’t raise an erection, the woman can’t be sexually satisfied.
- If a man can’t get an erection, he can’t come.
- If can’t get hard, she’ll leave me.
- Intercourse requires a rigid erection.
- Lovemaking is impossible without an erection.
- With age, all men develop ED.

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Erection Myths—And The Truth About Erections

In many men over 40, sexual myths contribute to normal middle-age erection balkiness and to more serious erectile dysfunction (ED). Here are the most erection-deflating myths—and the truth about these issues:

Myth: Erection is something men “achieve.”

The American Urological Association (AUA) defines erectile dysfunction (ED) as “inability for at least 3 months to achieve or maintain erection sufficient for

satisfactory sexual performance.” Note the word “achieve.” The implication is that erection is something a man must work to produce, as though he were running a race or erecting a building.

But how exactly does a man “achieve” an erection? Most men take theirs for granted until sometime after 40 (and usually by 50), when erections begin to change. The site of an alluring woman no longer necessitates re-arranging the underwear. Erections no longer rise without some (or a good deal of) fondling, by hand, mouth, or sex toy. Post-40 erection balkiness is often unnerving—ore worse. Something men have always taken for granted can’t be anymore. All of a sudden, erection requires effort, work, *achieving*.

The problem with “achieving” erections is that the best way to raise one after 40 is to do the *opposite* of achieving. The key to erections after 40—at any age, really—is *relaxation*, the kind that involves deep breathing and whole body-massage. Deep breathing and sensual touch open (dilate) blood vessels around the entire body, including those that carry blood into the penis. As the penile arteries dilate, more blood flows into the organ, and an erection rises.

The struggle to “achieve” erection is actually counterproductive. It generates considerably stress, and stress constricts blood vessels around the body, including those in the penis. Stress limits blood flow into the organ, and contributes to normal middle-age erection balkiness and to ED.

Forget about “achieving” erections. You can’t will or force them. Erection is the result of deep sensual relaxation. The more sensual a couple’s loveplay, the more likely the man is to be able to rise to the occasion, though after 50 this may take a while. Sex therapists describe the situation this way: What young men want to do all night takes older men all night to do.

In addition, leisurely, playful, whole-body, massage-inspired sensuality is critical to women’s sexual arousal—and arousal is contagious. The more turned on the woman becomes, the more turned on—and erect—the man is likely to become.

Myth: Sex is a performance.

The AUA definition of ED mentions “satisfactory sexual performance.” Like the word “achieve,” the term “performance” has pernicious implications. It makes men feel they’re being judged, that women are rating them as lovers and telling everyone they know.

When men think of sex as a performance they're likely to do what sex therapists call "spectatoring." Instead of feeling relaxed and fully engaged, sex assumes aspects of an out-of-body experience. Part of the man is making love, while the rest of him is somewhere else, watching him do it, a spectator at a performance.

Most people are extremely self-critical. Spectatoring invites self-criticism—and the stress and distractions that accompany it. Stop spectatoring. Sex is not a performance to be watched and judged. Great sex is a form of adult *play*. It's best when the two lovers feel deeply relaxed, when the focus is entirely on giving and receiving pleasure. There's no performance, no audience cheering or booing, no reviews. It's just the two of you enjoying each other's intimate company.

Myth: Men are sex machines, always ready, always hard.

An old joke asks: What single word can a woman say to sexually arouse a man?
Answer: Hello.

The assumption is that men are so easily aroused that any female attention produces a bulge in their pants. That may be true at age 23. But after 40, things usually change. Men over 40 still think about sex frequently, but erections become balky, arousal is no longer automatic, and like women, men develop a set of conditions that must be met before they can raise erections, feel turned on, and enjoy sex.

The conditions necessary for erection vary from man to man, but typically include: privacy, deep relaxation, a feeling of emotional closeness with the woman, a romantic setting, no interruptions or distractions, and specific types of sexual stimulation. (Now, an estimated 1-3 percent of people get turned on by risky sex, for example, sex in public. But 97 to 99 percent of lovers prefer—and require—privacy, comfort, and safety.)

It's perfectly normal to have conditions for sex. In fact, it's unusual not to. Many men love to attend professional football games. But if the game is outdoors and it's 10 below zero, and snowing with gale-force winds, a man might decide not to go. Sex is similar. Men can love sex, but still need certain conditions to enjoy it. If those conditions are not met, a man's penis might not be interested. Especially a man over 40.

Myth: You get only one chance at erection per sexual encounter. If it wilts, sex is over, and you're a failure.

Some 22 year olds can stay rock-hard from the drop of a zipper through orgasm. But as the years pass, even men who once had perpetually firm erections during sex begin to experience some waxing and waning. For many (most?) men over 40, sex involves erections that go from firm to less firm—or even flaccid—and then back to firm, possibly several times. As men age from 40 to 50 and beyond, they need more and more direct penis fondling to raise and maintain erections. This is normal and natural, and no cause for alarm. But it marks a sexual change. After 40, a man may have to ask for more direct penis fondling, and the specific kind(s) of stimulation he enjoys.

Unfortunately, when men who believe the “only once chance” myth experience any erection subsidence, they become anxious—or worse. This is self-defeating. Anxiety deflates erection. If an erection subsides during sex, don’t tense up and think: It’s all over. Instead, breathe deeply, relax, ask your lover to caress your penis in a way you enjoy, and focus on an erotic fantasy. Chances are, your erection will return.

Many women also believe the myth that erections “should” remain hard throughout lovemaking. If an erection subsides, *they* may feel less desirable, or think *they* are sexual failures. Reassure them that after 40, it’s perfectly normal for erections to wax and wane. When they subside, both lovers should understand that the man needs more direct caressing.

Myth: I blew it last time. I’ll never get it up again.

This myth is similar to the previous one—and equally false. Of course, it’s disconcerting not to become erect during sex. But it’s a big mistake to over-generalize a single experience to a subsequent lifetime of ED. If a man misses a shot in basketball, does it mean he’ll never make another? If he loses a hand of poker, does it mean he’ll never win again? If a relationship ends, are you fated to remain single forever? Sometimes things work, sometimes they don’t. But in most aspects of life, men know that another day means another chance to succeed. Unfortunately, many men believe their penises don’t give them second chances. Relax: They do.

If a man finds that he’s having erection difficulties, he should take a careful look at the situation. Here are some possible reasons why things might not work: Fatigue, sleepiness, alcohol, physical discomfort, distractions, and emotional stress (job, money, family, or relationship problems, or jackhammers in the street). If men can’t give sex the undivided attention it deserves—especially men over 40—their erections may decide to wait until next time. Work to eliminate stresses and

distractions. Invest extra time and effort in your relationship, in relaxation and sensuality. Your penis (and your lover) will thank you.

Myth: When I can't get hard, she says it doesn't matter. She's lying.

In surveys that have asked women how they feel about men with erection problems, here is by far their most frequent comment: I wish he wasn't as obsessed about the situation as he is.

For most women, a man's lack of erection is less of a problem than his anxiety, depression, anger, confusion, and emotional withdrawal because of it. Erection matters to women, largely because it matters so much to men. Women know that if a man can't get it up, he's going to be miserable, which affects her.

But erections are *not necessary for women's sexual satisfaction*. Only 25 percent of women are consistently orgasmic from vaginal intercourse. To have orgasms, most women need direct clitoral stimulation, with fingers, tongue, or a vibrator. In this context, erections don't matter to most women's orgasms. When a woman says that erection doesn't matter, what she usually means is that the couple can still have plenty of sensual fun—and great orgasms—without the man having an erection, and that things are likely to be better next time.

Myth: If a man can't raise an erection, the woman can't be sexually satisfied.

No, no, no. Men who believe this myth put tremendous pressure on themselves to get hard and stay hard. That stress wreaks havoc on erections.

This may come as a surprise, but the vagina is not well endowed with nerves that respond to sexual stimulation, and the deeper inside the vagina your penis goes, the fewer touch-sensitive nerves it finds. Most women enjoy intercourse for the physical closeness it involves, and because it's such a turn-on for so many men. But vaginal intercourse is *not* the key to most women's sexual satisfaction. Women's main source of sexual pleasure and satisfaction is the clitoris, located outside the vagina and a few inches above it, under the top junction of the vaginal lips.

Dozens of sexological studies show that only 25 percent of women are consistently orgasmic from vaginal intercourse. Three-quarters of women need direct clitoral stimulation at least some of the time, and an estimated one-quarter to one-third of women rarely if ever have orgasms during intercourse. Erection is not necessary to satisfy a woman, nor to have her consider a man a good lover.

Myth: If a man can't get an erection, he can't come.

Not true. Different sets of nerves control erection and orgasm. Men can have orgasms without erections (and erections without orgasm). Many men older men develop prostate cancer and as a result of treatment, lose the ability to have erections. But they can still have orgasms—marvelous, fulfilling orgasms—if they relax, enjoy leisurely, playful, mutually erotic massage, and receive vigorous penile stimulation by hand, mouth, or sex toy.

Myth: If can't get hard, she'll leave me.

It's possible, of course, but people tend to be more self-critical than they are critical of others. If a man can't raise an erection, the woman is more likely to believe that he's lost sexual interest in *her*, that he no longer finds her desirable, or that he's having an affair and is about to leave *her*. Couples rarely break up solely because of sex problems. If a man develops an erection problem, chances are she won't pack her bags. She's much more likely to want to help her lover resolve the problem or adjust to it.

Myth: Intercourse requires a rigid erection.

Actually, a semi-erection is usually good enough. There's no need to feel anxious if you're not completely firm. To enjoy intercourse with a semi-erection:

- Relax. Anxiety is likely to make erections subside even more.
- Ask for the stimulation you need. Tell your lover how you would like to be caressed to maintain your semi-erection. You might need more vigorous stroking than she's likely to provide without a specific request.
- Make sure the woman is highly aroused and well lubricated before you attempt insertion. It takes at least 30 minutes of kissing, hugging, and non-genital sensual massage for most women to become fully aroused—especially women over 40. When women are fully aroused, their vaginal lips part, allowing easier entry. Also, in women under 40, full arousal usually (but not always) means self-lubrication adequate for comfortable intercourse. But some women under 40 and most women over 40 do not produce enough vaginal lubrication for comfortable intercourse. There is nothing wrong with a woman who does not self-lubricate copiously. Some

women simply don't produce much. And beginning after 40, as menopausal changes develop, self-lubrication diminishes. At any age, if lubrication is a problem, use a commercial lubricant. Many sex therapists recommend lubricant every time, no matter how well the women self-lubricates.

- Ask her to keep fondling you as you insert and guide you in. She shouldn't let go until the head and upper shaft of your penis are inside her. This is easiest in the missionary and woman-on-top positions. If you enjoy the rear entry (doggie style), stroke yourself.

Myth: Lovemaking is impossible without an erection.

Absolutely not. Plenty of men who cannot physically have erections—prostate cancer survivors, men with spinal cord injuries, etc.—enjoy active sex lives, marvelous orgasms, and fully satisfied lovers. There's more to great sex than a firm erection. Even without an erection, kissing, cuddling, and extended erotic whole-body massage can lead to wonderful sexual fulfillment. The vast majority of women need direct clitoral stimulation to have orgasms. Erection is not necessary for that. Use fingers, a tongue, and sex toys. And erection is not necessary for men to have orgasms. Vigorous stimulation of a flaccid penis by hand, mouth, or sex toys can produce fulfilling orgasms.

With age, all men develop ED.

Aging brings erection changes. After 40, men gradually lose the ability to raise an erection from fantasy alone. They need direct stimulation by hand, mouth, or sex toys. As the years pass, and men enter their 60s, it may take vigorous, extended stimulation before their penises respond, and when they do, erections may not become as firm as they used to, and they may subside without ongoing fondling. But that's not ED. That's normal, age-related erection balkiness. ED is the persistent inability to raise erections at all, even during masturbation.

ED is *not* inevitable with age. Even among men over 70, severe ED affects only about one-third of men.