

Erectile dysfunction: A window to whole body health

Written by Nicole Winbush MD
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Erectile Dysfunction (ED) is the most common sexual health problem in men, affecting more than 1/3 of men during their lifetime. ED is defined as the inability for a man to achieve or maintain an erection of the penis that is sufficient for sexual activity. Health conditions like high blood pressure and diabetes can double or triple the risk of developing ED. ED can also be an early warning sign of underlying health conditions like heart disease as many individuals who go on to have a heart attack, often have a history of ED in the preceding years. However, you have the power to improve your overall health and a growing body of evidence suggests that healthy lifestyle changes can significantly decrease your chances of developing ED and may potentially improve ED symptoms.

ED is a symptom and not a disease (despite what the drug companies might want to have you believe) and the first step in regaining one's sexual health should be trying to identify and modify the underlying cause of ED. The causes of ED are not all fully understood and involve a complex interplay between hormones (chemical messengers in your body), existing health conditions, medications, dietary habits, weight and behavioral factors (like stress). This week I discuss some steps you can take to significantly decrease your chances of developing ED and to potentially improve ED symptoms. As always, if symptoms persist, you should see your healthcare provider.

Stop Smoking and if you drink alcohol, drink in moderation. If you needed yet another reason to quit smoking, here it is. Smoking and the chemicals and irritation produced by it are damaging to almost all of the tissues in your body leading to higher rates of many cancers, heart disease and smoking **DOUBLES** the risk of developing ED. Similarly, excessive drinking (more than an average of 2 servings of alcohol per day) is associated with an increased risk of ED. It can be easier said than done to quit smoking (or drinking) if this has become a habit. However, there are many community resources that stand ready to assist you with this. Your healthcare provider can help you.

Commit yourself to living a lifestyle that improves your blood pressure. High blood pressure is a serious health concern in men and rates are even higher in the African-American community with over 40% of African American men having hypertension. Many people have high blood pressure and do not know it. So, if you are suffering from ED, get your blood pressure checked. Regular exercise improves heart health and can lower blood pressure. Studies also show that regular physical activity makes you less likely to develop ED and may improve ED symptoms. In addition, if you have ED, research suggests that regular physical activity may increase the effectiveness of ED drugs. If you have high blood pressure, you likely are taking blood pressure medications. While it is true that a very few blood pressure medications can contribute to ED, this is not a reason to stop your meds. A healthy choice is to really commit yourself to making the types of lifestyle changes that will allow you to regain better control of your blood pressure and may in time reduce your reliance on medication.

Make healthful eating choices and work on losing the fat

Overweight and obesity are reaching epidemic proportions in our country and our community. There is growing recognition that the dangers of being overweight are not just related to the extra pounds that individuals carry around, but that carrying extra fat (especially around the middle) can set up a complex cascade of events that cause irritation and inflammation in the

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tissues that may be a common pathway leading to many chronic diseases from eczema and arthritis, diabetes, heart disease and ED. Eating a Mediterranean style diet (a diet high in vegetables, fruits, healthy fats like olive oil and nuts, and limited meat etc.) has been shown to reduce inflammation, improve heart health and blood sugars, assist in weight loss and is associated with improvements in ED. (see my website for resources on Mediterranean diet) The effects may be even better if combined with regular exercise.

Keep the lines of communication open -find ways to manage your stress and communicate openly with your partner

Stress can impact sexual health and contribute to ED. It is important to develop and maintain open communication with your partner and find ways to discuss feelings in a constructive way. If you are finding this difficult to do, see your healthcare provider and they can assist you with identifying resources.

Individual health is community health

ED is a complex issue that often has a combination of underlying reasons that can be both physical and emotional. Applying the above strategies will not only assist in improving your overall health, but may also improve ED symptoms. Sexual health is part of overall health and individual health and the health of our communities are intertwined. As we prioritize our health and make individual choices to improve our health and function and our relationships, then communities in which we live also benefit.

Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. For more information, to leave suggestions for future articles and for additional resources as mentioned in the article visit www.functionwellmedicine.com.

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