



Sexual Health & *his Heart*



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You are entitled to enjoy a healthy and fulfilling life, even into your senior years and this includes sexual intimacy and activity.

However, it is estimated that in the general population approximately one in ten men - roughly 200,000 Irish men - may suffer from a problem called erectile dysfunction.¹ Erectile dysfunction is when you have continuous or occasional problems achieving an erection (a hard penis) to complete sexual intercourse. As you get older this problem may occur more often.

With support from your doctor, erectile dysfunction can be successfully treated in most cases. Doctors used to think erection problems were mainly psychological or “in the mind”. However, erectile dysfunction has a physical cause in many cases which can be due to a variety of reasons including alcohol overuse, smoking, the possible side effects of prescribed medication, and illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity and depression.²

Your doctor will be neither surprised nor shocked if you mention that you are experiencing erection problems, so make your mind up today to bring this up with your doctor when you can.

Dr Stephen Murphy

CHAIRPERSON — SEXUAL DYSFUNCTION INFORMATION BUREAU

This leaflet provides information on one aspect of men's sexual health. It explains the many reasons why men may suffer from erection problems. It outlines where you can get confidential advice, support and treatment. Erection problems can often be a side effect for some men with heart disease. Background information on heart disease and your possible risk of getting the disease is also given.



Sexual Health

Sexual activity is part of a healthy lifestyle – it actually provides a form of physical exercise and also promotes good self-esteem.

Sexual problems may cause considerable tension in an otherwise healthy and fulfilling relationship. If you worry about your erection problems, this may cause constant anxiety because of 'fear of failure to perform'. This may have an impact on your self esteem and confidence.

The first step may be to discuss your erectile dysfunction with your wife or partner, even if it seems difficult or embarrassing. Partners sometimes feel that they are somehow responsible and this can further add to tensions in a relationship.



Many couples still enjoy intimacy without having sexual intercourse and if this is satisfactory for you and your partner then erectile dysfunction may have no negative impact on your life. However, you should get your health checked with your family doctor to rule out the possibility of other diseases such as heart disease.

Why are erection problems more common in men with heart problems?

There are many different forms of heart and blood vessel disease and they can affect your ability to have or maintain an erection in a number of ways:

- If you have heart disease (and any complications linked to it) this can make it more difficult for your heart to pump the necessary amount of blood to the body's organs, including the penis.³ Since an erection depends on enough blood flowing to the penis, you may have erection problems at some stage.

What is heart disease?

Heart disease, or the more medical term – cardiovascular disease includes diseases of the arteries, veins, heart valves, heart muscle as well as strokes. The most common type of heart disease is caused by hardening of the arteries (known as atherosclerosis).

- Atherosclerosis causes arteries to narrow or harden, and so restrict blood . As well as the heart and brain, this can also happen in the pelvis and penis. On average, the penis arteries are smaller than the heart arteries which explains why they may experience symptoms first.
- If you have high blood pressure or angina, the medication you take for these conditions can sometimes cause erection problems.
- As many as two out of three men with high blood pressure have some erection problems.⁴ You may not know that you have high blood pressure as it does not have any symptoms. So if you have erection problems, get your blood pressure checked.

- If you have been diagnosed with heart disease, you may worry that exercise will bring on a heart attack or a stroke. However, this is usually not true and regular mild exercise may actually be good for you. You should always discuss with your doctor what type and how much exercise, including sexual intercourse, would be safe for your condition.

What treatment is available for people with erection problems and cardiovascular disease?

Your treatment will vary depending on the cause of your erection problem and treatment can include:

- prescription tablets;
- intracavernosal injections (injections to the penis);
- transurethral therapy (a tiny pellet is inserted into the penis using an applicator);
- a vacuum pump (which you can use to stimulate the penis and cause an erection); and
- penile implants.

If you suffer from heart disease, there is a strong probability that your erection problem has a physical cause. However, living and coping with erection problems may cause significant emotional distress, so counselling or psychological help may be beneficial.



Support

Although there are several treatments available for erection problems, many men are still too embarrassed to discuss their problem with anyone. Don't let embarrassment stop you getting medical advice for sexual problems - the link between heart disease and sexual-health problems is well known and your doctor can discuss the various available treatments with you.

When you make the appointment with your doctor you may want to arrange a routine check-up and then discuss your erection problem when you actually see the doctor.

Don't be afraid to ask your wife or partner for support. Erectile dysfunction is a man's condition, but a couple's concern. Visiting your doctor with your partner may help you to overcome the sense of anxiety or embarrassment that many men have about their erection problem.



Remember, there is no age limit to enjoying a healthy physical relationship.



Who is at risk of heart disease?

Your risk of heart disease is increased by the following factors:⁵

- **Age** - as you get older your risk of developing many diseases, including heart disease, increases.
- **Gender** - men are more likely to suffer at an earlier age from heart disease than women.
- **Family history** - a history of heart disease in your family will increase your risk of heart disease.
- **Smoking** - if you smoke, you are more likely to suffer from heart disease than non-smokers.
- **Diet** - what you eat greatly influences your heart health. For a healthy heart eat the following:
 - plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables,
 - wholegrain foods such as high fibre breads and cereals, oily fish about twice a week, less fatty foods, fries, snack foods and confectionary.



- **Physical activity** - being active reduces your risk of heart disease - aim to be active for at least 30 minutes most days of the week.
- **Cholesterol level** - if you have a high cholesterol level you are more likely to have heart problems. Foods high in saturated fat can increase your cholesterol levels, so eat less fatty and fried foods, snacks and confectionary.
- **Blood pressure** - high blood pressure puts more strain on your heart and increases your risk of heart disease. To help reduce your blood pressure:
 - eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
 - reduce your salt intake
 - be active for at least 30 minutes every day
- **Weight** - if you are overweight you are more at risk of high blood pressure and diabetes. Both these conditions are linked to heart disease. If you are obese, your risk for both these conditions is even higher.

For more information on erectile dysfunction, contact:

Sexual Dysfunction Information Bureau

PO Box 8064
Dublin 2.

Helpline: 1850 923 098

Web: www.impotenceireland.com

For more information on heart disease, contact:

Irish Heart Foundation

4 Clyde Road
Ballsbridge
Dublin 4.

Phone: 01 668 5001

Web: www.irishheart.ie

Notes

References:
¹ <http://www.sda.uk.net>
² <http://www.vhi.ie/hfiles/hf-036.jsphttp://www.vhi.ie/hfiles/hf-036.jsp>
³ Data on file.
⁴ Data on file.
⁵ <http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4726>