

ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION (ED) or IMPOTENCE

Impotence is simply described as the inability to achieve or maintain an erection suitable for sexual intercourse. Impotence affects 20 million American men or about 10% of the entire male population and 35% of the men over the age of 60. An erection is created when the penis fills with blood much like a tire fills with air. The blood is pumped into the penis and not allowed out, and the more blood that is pumped in, the firmer the erection. The reasons for lack of erections are either the lack of appropriate filling of the penis or inappropriate emptying. Because the nervous system controls the arteries and veins, psychological problems can cause emptying of the penis at unwanted times. At one time it was felt that psychological causes were the most important, but we have come to realize that they are actually in a significant minority. The major causes of impotence today are diabetes, atherosclerosis or hardening of the arteries, and impotence following radical pelvic surgery. Other causes include spinal cord injuries, hormonal problems, and multiple sclerosis. The abuse of drugs, alcoholism and smoking can interfere with normal erections, and well over 200 different prescription medications can cause impotence as a side effect.

DIAGNOSIS

The diagnosis of impotence can be made by any physician with an interest in the diagnosis. A complete history and physical along with some psychologic screening and an evaluation of the hormone levels are most important. Other tests may include an evaluation of erections while sleeping.

We know that a healthy male might have four to five erections during a night of restful sleep. This is something that cannot be suppressed by psychologic means, and measuring these erections can be helpful in determining the nature of the cause of impotence. Other studies include evaluation of nerve function, blood flow measurements to the penis, ultrasound of the penis and x-rays of the arteries and veins of the penis. **Many of these additional tests are invasive and expensive. While the results are often enlightening, they rarely change the options for treatment.**

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