

Keyword: erectile dysfunction

Problem: Erectile dysfunction is a common male problem often associated with heart disease. Less than half of men talk to their PCP about this sexual health concern. However, the link between erectile dysfunction and heart disease is undeniable. By improving cardiovascular health, many men enjoy the added benefit of sexual health.

Solution: Most men are more likely to talk to their doctor about heart problems than sexual ones. Physicians need to be able and willing to broach sensitive topics like sexual health.

Erectile Dysfunction: How Is It Linked to Heart Disease?

Non-communicable diseases cause more than 70% of global deaths. Cardiovascular diseases (CVD) account for the vast majority of those. Disability related to poor cardiovascular health is a mounting concern and an increasing socio-economic burden. The National Institute for Health (NIH) reports that CVD impacts a growing number of younger men annually. This information drives research to identify early risk factors to combat the problem.

Erectile dysfunction (ED) is a major concern for men of all ages. The inability to maintain an erection is often an early warning sign of current or impending heart issues. Screening men with ED for heart disease may improve vascular health. However, less than half of men talk to their PCP about this sexual health concern. Physicians need to be able and willing to broach sensitive topics like ED.

Key Takeaways

- Erectile dysfunction is a common male problem often associated with cardiovascular disease. More than 50% of men with ED have a history of CVD.
- Endothelial dysfunction and atherosclerosis are often the underlying causes of erectile dysfunction.
- CVD and ED share disease processes and many risk factors. Experts believe that ED may be the first indicator of heart disease.
- ED often precedes a MACE by three years. However, approximately 50% of men never talk to their doctor about ED.
- Physicians should screen all patients with erectile dysfunction for cardiovascular conditions. Additionally, PCPs need to broach sensitive topics like sexual health.

The link between erectile dysfunction and heart disease

Erectile dysfunction and many heart conditions share etiology and risk factors. Previously, experts believed atherosclerosis was the sole cause of ED. However, current research indicates ED often originates in the endothelium and smooth muscles.

Endothelial dysfunction causes vasospasm and diminished blood flow, increasing patients' risk of atherosclerosis. Plaque buildup in the arteries causes atherosclerosis, leading to poor circulation. This buildup diminishes nutrient and oxygen supply to organs, including the penis. Erectile dysfunction does not always indicate heart disease. However, statistics show that ED precedes many CVD diagnoses.

Evaluating the numbers

More than 50% of men with ED have a history of cardiovascular disease. ED often occurs before a major adverse cardiovascular event (MACE). Men with ED have a 59% increased relative risk for ischemic heart disease (IHD) and a 34% increased risk for stroke.

ED and CVD are different presentations of systemic arterial injury. The smaller diameter of the penile arteries causes ED to occur earlier than IHD, peripheral artery disease (PAD) or stroke.

On average, ED precedes an initial cardiovascular event by three years. Many experts believe that the penile vessels may occlude first, making ED the foremost indicator of CVD.

What are common risk factors?

ED and CVD not only share the same disease process, but they also have many common risk factors:

- Diabetes
- Hypertension
- Hyperlipidemia
- Obesity
- Age
- Low testosterone
- Tobacco use
- Alcohol use

These conditions damage blood vessels, injuring organs that depend on them for nutrients and oxygen. By improving vascular health, men can **reduce the risk of MACE and enhance sexual performance.**

Improving sexual and cardiovascular health

The link between ED and heart disease is undeniable. Physicians should **screen all men with ED for heart disease before beginning treatment**. The goal of screening is to improve cardiovascular mortality and morbidity. Physicians should evaluate:

- Blood pressure
- BMI
- Lipid profile
- HbA1C or fasting glucose
- Testosterone level

Erectile dysfunction is a common male problem often associated with heart disease. However, with screening and intervention, men can experience improved sexual and cardiovascular health.

Lifestyle changes

Lifestyle modifications are an undervalued ED therapy. However, **if men knew they could improve sexual function, they may be motivated** to make some essential changes. These lifestyle modifications are vital to enhancing heart and sexual wellness:

- Increase physical activity
- Weight reduction
- Smoking cessation
- Alcohol intake reduction

Improving healthy habits does not necessarily produce immediate results. Sometimes, it takes a year or more for men to see improvements. The need for persistence can be discouraging. That is why many providers recommend medication while working towards a healthy lifestyle.

Pharmaceuticals

The first line of defense for men presenting with ED and CVD risk factors is addressing the cause. Pharmaceuticals that **treat diabetes, hypertension and hyperlipidemia improve vascular health, often resulting in enhanced sexual function**. Holistic interventions for ED prioritize treating the underlying cause. These interventions may even prevent a MACE.

If these interventions prove ineffective in restoring sexual function, physicians can prescribe a phosphodiesterase-5 inhibitor (PDE5i). This medication improves sexual function in the following ways:

- Smooth muscle relaxation
- Arterial dilatation
- Increased blood flow

- Sinusoidal filling
- Emissary vein occlusion

PDE5i helps men maintain an erection, but it does not treat the problem. Doctors must prioritize the cardiovascular risk factors associated with ED.

Restoring quality of life with holistic care

Sexual function is vital to quality of life, but many men shy away from talking to their doctor about concerns. However, experts believe that ED is one of the first signs of cardiovascular disease. Men do not know that ED is more than a sexual problem. Physicians need to be able and willing to broach sensitive topics like sexual health. Your patient's life may even depend on it.

Our hospital is here to help your patients live life to the fullest. We understand the importance of holistic health, which is why we commit to innovation, quality and personalized care. Look no further; we are your partner in care. To get started, click the "Refer" button.

Resources

"Erectile Dysfunction Is a Hallmark of Cardiovascular Disease: Unavoidable Matter of Fact or Opportunity to Improve Men's Health?" NIH: National Library of Medicine, 2021, Erectile Dysfunction Is a Hallmark of Cardiovascular Disease: Unavoidable Matter of Fact or Opportunity to Improve Men's Health? - PMC.

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