

Sexual Dysfunction

If it's a physical issue ...

— BY DIANE YORK —



“If it wasn't for pickpockets and frisking at airports I'd have no sex life at all.”

—Rodney Dangerfield

Is this you? If so, take heart — there is no reason these days to go without. Sexual function need not decline as you age. While men's and women's sexual problems tend to be different, both are often physical, not psychological, in nature, and both can be researched and resolved with a high degree of success.

MEN

Dr. Anthony Sliwinski, of the Virginia Urology Center and medical director of the Men's Wellness Center in Richmond, says 50 percent of men over the age of 50 experience some aspect of erectile dysfunction (ED) and that 90 percent of those cases have a physical basis.

He says we should look at resolving the most obvious causes of erectile dysfunction first. Smoking, obesity, uncontrolled diabetes and other circulation problems can lead to ED. If making changes in these areas does not work, there are medications. Highly effective Levitra and Viagra must be taken within two to four hours of intercourse. Cialis, on the other hand, lasts as long as 36 hours. If medications do not resolve the problem, other options include vacuum pumps, injections and surgery.

Even as a young man, Jack Walters (not his real name) had some difficulty keeping erections. He thought his problem to be typical and never told anyone. As he got older, things got worse. Finally, he spoke with his family doctor, who tried him on the three mainstay impotence drugs. The drugs helped, but only for a few years. When Walters was 68, his internist referred him to Sliwinski.

Sliwinski diagnosed Walters' problem as a venous leak. The condition, due to the loss of blood pressure in the penis, allows the individual to have erections but not maintain them. Sliwinski suggested penile implant surgery.

“I really had very little discomfort following surgery and have had no problems with this procedure,” Walters says now. The surgery is quick, taking about half an hour. Recovery is two to three weeks, but a patient can go back to work after three days. Sex may be resumed in one month.

Walters is happy with the results: “I thought my difficulties in maintaining an erection were irreversible. I can't tell you how much this is worth to me. If I had understood this problem was solvable, I would have done it years ago.”

WOMEN

Women's problems can be more complex to diagnose. Dr. Joyce Ann Hudson is an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the VCU School of Medicine, a licensed clinical psychologist and a certified sex therapy diplomate with 30 years of experience.

Hudson says she has seen numerous happy couples whose sex life is difficult and many couples with unhappy marriages who have great sex lives. As with men, she believes that most women's sexual dysfunction problems are the result of a lack of understanding of their own sexual arousal process and how to meet their bodies' requirements for sexual fulfillment. So a thorough gynecological examination is extremely important prior to therapy to rule out and/or treat

medical issues that might play a roll in the sexual dysfunction.

Physical causes can include the following: adhesions from childbirth; vulvar vestibulitis (a common, painful inflammation of the vagina); infection of the cervix, uterus or fallopian tubes (pelvic inflammatory disease); endometriosis; growths in the pelvis (such as tumors and ovarian cysts); and bands of scar tissue between organs in the pelvis, which may form after an infection, surgery or radiation therapy for cancer.

The vagina can also become hypersensitive from allergic reactions to lubricants, condoms, birth control devices or sperm. A typical problem among women as they age is that the vagina does not secrete enough fluids because of lowered estrogen levels. This can be solved by increasing estrogen levels or by the use of lubricants that are non-irritating or hypoallergenic. Certain medications, including some antidepressants, blood pressure medicines, antihistamines and chemotherapy drugs, can decrease a woman's sex drive and her body's ability to experience orgasm.

THE BOTTOM LINE

What is the most common cause of sexual dysfunction in men and women today? Hudson says it's lack of quality time, coupled with fatigue. The people she sees in her practice are so busy with work, children, activities and other responsibilities, they have no time for sex, and when they do have the time, they are exhausted. “The body puts a priority on sleep,” she says, and evidently sleep trumps sex.

Basic good physical health and quality time with your partner is essential. If having health and quality time does not solve your problem, see a doctor. Happily, most sexual problems can be resolved. **B**

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