

FEEL  
GOOD

sexual healing

# Understanding

# PEE

*A woman's guide to a  
man's most sensitive  
sexual situation*

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**You love him, he loves you, and you wouldn't want anyone else by your side as you tackle life's ups and downs. But even the closest of couples can trip up trying to deal with—or even talk about—erectile dysfunction (politely referred to as ED).**

ED is when a man is unable to either get or sustain an erection. “ED isn't a disease, but it can be a symptom of some other problem,” says ED expert Associate Professor Doug Lording from Andrology Australia. “It shouldn't be confused with low libido (having little interest in sex) or with the inability to orgasm or ejaculate. These problems require different approaches and treatments.”

For men in their 20s, ED is a rare event, but in later decades, its likelihood increases exponentially. At least one in five Aussie men over the age of 40 has erectile problems, increasing to two in three men over the age of 70. “Like the rest of the ageing body, the penis loses ‘muscle tone’. This means arousal can take longer, and the resulting erection is usually not as firm as it once was,” says Lording. “For most men, erectile dysfunction can't be cured, but it *can* be treated.”

The best solution isn't necessarily a little blue pill; now there's a menu of options that can both help him perform better and draw the two of you closer. This is important, because for women, having a partner with ED can be tinged with emotional issues. “Women often take their partner's ED personally,” says sex therapist and relationship counsellor Désirée Spierings, director of Sexual Health Australia. “They make up their own stories to explain it, thinking, *He's not attracted to me anymore, He must be having an affair or Maybe he's gay*. And these stories can be much worse than the reality!”

## HIS BODY

“A man's penis can be a barometer of his health; erectile difficulties can point to other problems,” says Spierings. Common medical culprits behind

ED are high cholesterol and high blood pressure (both of which slow blood flow to all parts of the body, including the penis). Side effects from drugs such as blood-pressure medications and antidepressants are also notorious erection killers, so talk to your doctor about your man's meds. He or she can adjust doses or possibly prescribe medicines that are free of the ED side effect. If lagging testosterone levels are to blame, your partner can use a prescription hormone replacement. In a worst-case scenario, a poor erection can signal heart concerns two to five years before they're discovered in heart-specific tests, which is why your doctor's timely involvement is crucial. “There's no proven way to prevent erectile problems, but for some men, early treatment can stop the problem from getting worse,” says Lording.

## HIS LIFESTYLE

Some cases of ED subside when a man begins to eat better or lose weight, or stops smoking. Try nudging him out the door for walks (no marathons or lycra bike shorts required!). In a recent Mayo Clinic study from the US, men who changed their daily routines to improve their cardio health (by dropping kilos and exercising, for example) lowered their incidence of ED. Other studies show that men who kick the tobacco habit enjoy more rigid erections than those who keep puffing do. And consider overhauling his diet with heart-healthy meals. Some research suggests that the Mediterranean diet





is the healthiest eating plan for men with erection problems. Its focus on natural foods that contain healthy fats, such as nuts and olive oil, helps clear blood vessels of dangerous plaque and boost production of nitric oxide, a compound that facilitates erections by dilating blood vessels in the penis.

### HIS MOOD

If your partner is feeling dejected, tense or anxious, ED can be an unwelcome side effect. And for many men, it doesn't take a traumatic event to bring on ED, says clinical psychologist Marianne Brandon, PhD; unfortunately, daily stress and tension can be enough to trigger sexual dysfunction. If this is the case with your man, you may want to suggest that he see a sex therapist, a professional who is trained in helping patients unravel the emotional causes of ED and who can provide tools to address it. "Some men's sexual function won't improve if they don't deal with the psychological side of the problem," says Lording.

### Sexual solutions

A shift in bedroom behaviour can also work wonders—for both of you. "Transfer the focus from intercourse to pleasure, so sex becomes less

about his erection," suggests Brandon. "At the same time, don't think of his penis as off limits. Even if he has trouble becoming erect, it doesn't mean he's not experiencing pleasure. Many people don't know that it's possible for men to have an orgasm without an erection. Erections



## NATURAL SELECTION

Your supermarket and health-food store also offer remedies to help with erectile dysfunction (ED).

### Food

In a study published in the *International Journal of Impotence Research*, men who drank pomegranate juice for four weeks had improved scores on an ED assessment. And Turkish experts have revealed that eating 100 g of pistachio nuts a day for three weeks can improve men's ED—without producing unwanted side effects.

### Ginkgo

A daily 50- to 100-mg dose of this herbal extract might help: it boosts circulation and could also improve blood flow to the penis. Researchers say that ginkgo may even ease the libido-suppressing side effects of antidepressants. But check with your GP about it, as it may also ramp up the effects of some blood-thinning medications.

### L-Arginine

A natural dietary building block, this essential amino acid increases the body's production of nitric oxide, a compound that facilitates erections by dilating blood vessels in the penis. Studies have shown that L-arginine improves male ED, but it does so only in men who have low levels of nitric oxide, such as those linked to cardiovascular problems.

### Red Ginseng

A multistudy overview from the UK's University of Exeter recently revealed the potent power of this herb. Red ginseng significantly improved ED in male study subjects by relaxing muscles in the penis and enabling better blood flow, thereby helping give rise to an erection. Subjects also reported very few adverse side effects.



*“Overseas-based pharmacies, many of which have sophisticated websites, are selling unreliable medicines”*

involve the swelling of blood vessels; orgasm and ejaculation involve muscle spasms. These two different processes don't have to occur together.” Sharing erotica, trying out body massage and introducing vibrators into sexual play can all offer new avenues of satisfaction and connection.

### **Medical fixes**

If all else fails, there's always Viagra and its offshoots, Cialis and Levitra, all of which promote increased blood flow to the genital tissues. These medications can be highly effective—about 70% of Aussie men with ED benefit from taking oral meds; however, these drugs also tend to take the spontaneity out of sex, because couples need

to wait 30 minutes to an hour for the man to produce an erection.

If his ED doesn't respond to these therapies, he may want to consider other more aggressive prescription remedies. These include self-injections of medicine into the penis or a vacuum device that causes an erection by drawing blood into the penis (an elastic ring is then placed at the base of the penis to keep it rigid). Another option is implant surgery—the insertion of inflatable cylinders that fill with fluid when a pump inside the body is pressed to make the implant hard.

But never resort to the ubiquitous offers that swamp our email inboxes, promising a quick fix for a low price. “Overseas-based pharmacies, many of which have sophisticated websites, are selling unreliable medicines. Although some sell legitimate products, there's more and more evidence of significant drug counterfeiting, so you have no way of knowing what you're really buying,” warns Lording. **P**