

Sexual Advice Association

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Erectile Dysfunction (ED) and the heart

What is the connection?

The most common cause of Erectile Dysfunction (ED) is a problem with the circulation to the penis. The lining of the arteries that supply blood to the penis is called the endothelium (endothelium). This controls the speed with which blood enters the penis and if it fails to operate properly blood does not enter quickly enough or for long enough to get a rigid erection that lasts enough time for satisfactory sexual intercourse. The arteries suffer a narrowing and damaging process known as atheroma which is similar to a pipe furring up.

The link between ED and coronary artery disease (CAD) is that they share the same endothelium so a problem in one place may be present in another. This is why over 50% of men with CAD have ED. The problem is that over 50% of men with ED may have CAD they don't know about.

Can ED come before coronary artery disease?

The short answer is yes. The arteries to the penis are small in diameter (1-2mm) whereas the coronary arteries to the heart are 3-4mm. This means that a similar problem in the coronary arteries may be silent because the arteries are big enough not to be restricted whereas the smaller penile arteries suffer earlier leading to ED. It takes longer for the bigger arteries to be affected by the narrowing process but if it is allowed to continue a man with ED and no heart complaint may develop a heart complaint in the five-year period after his ED began. This means ED can identify someone at future risk of a heart attack giving a chance for us to prevent it occurring.

What are the risk factors for ED and coronary artery disease?

They are the same. High blood pressure, raised cholesterol, cigarette smoking, obesity, physical inactivity, depression and stress. So it is easy to explain why ED and coronary artery disease often coexist – it's really a matter of which comes first.

What to do if you have ED and no heart disease history

It is very important you see your doctor for a full check-up – you could have a raised blood pressure or high cholesterol for example. Lifestyle issues are important – losing weight if needed and increasing physical activity are the easiest to adopt and benefit both ED and CAD. Heart disease risks can be treated reducing the chances of a problem in the future. You may have had your ED successfully treated by tablets given you by a friend or bought on the internet, but getting your erection back without a check on the heart is asking for trouble.

What is the Take Home Message?

ED may be a warning of an impending heart problem – heed the warning because your life may depend on it – get checked out.

Further reading

Download our booklet "[sex and the heart](#)".

An invitation

..... to enrol as a friend of The Sexual Advice Association. For a small annual subscription you will know that you are contributing to a charity that helps overcome the problems of male and female sexual dysfunction. If you are interested please telephone or write for an application form or complete our on-line registration form.

June 2011



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