

Erectile Difficulties

A practical and compassionate guide

Erectile difficulties — including difficulty achieving or maintaining erections — are among the most common sexual concerns men experience. They affect approximately 30 million men in North America and become more prevalent with age; the likelihood of difficulties increases by 10% per decade (i.e., 40% likelihood by age 40, 70% by age 70, etc.). Occasional difficulty is *entirely normal*. When it becomes persistent and distressing, support is available and effective.

Understanding Erectile Function

Erections require the coordination of vascular, neurological, hormonal, and *psychological* systems. Any disruption, from cardiovascular disease to anxiety, can interfere. This is why erectile difficulties are sometimes an early warning sign of cardiovascular or metabolic health issues, and why a medical evaluation is always an important step.

Performance anxiety

Anxiety about erections is one of the *strongest maintainers* of erectile difficulties. The fear of losing an erection activates the sympathetic nervous system, which directly inhibits erection. This creates a self-fulfilling cycle that psychological treatment is specifically designed to interrupt.

Common Contributing Factors

- **Physical:** cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, hypertension, low testosterone, thyroid dysfunction, prostate conditions, medication side effects (antidepressants, antihypertensives, opioids)
- **Lifestyle:** smoking, heavy alcohol use, sedentary lifestyle, poor sleep
- **Psychological:** performance anxiety, depression, stress, relationship conflict, body image concerns, history of trauma or adverse sexual experiences
- **Relational:** poor sexual communication, incompatible expectations, trauma, loss of intimacy

Evidence-Based Tools

01 Medical Evaluation

Consult your physician. Request cardiovascular risk assessment, hormonal bloodwork (testosterone, thyroid), blood pressure, and blood glucose. Review current medications. Addressing underlying health conditions often resolves or significantly improves erectile function.

02 Sensate Focus

A structured programme developed by Masters and Johnson that removes performance pressure by temporarily taking intercourse off the table. Focus is placed on mutual, pleasurable touch and sensation, without any goal beyond presence and connection. Anxiety about erection diminishes when the expectation of intercourse is removed. Erections often return naturally as pressure lifts.

03 Cognitive Restructuring

Identify performance-focused thoughts ("I have to get hard," "They'll leave me," "What's wrong with me"). Challenge their accuracy and catastrophic framing. Replace with more realistic appraisals: "My partner cares about connection, not just erections," "One difficult experience doesn't define my sexuality."

04 Mindfulness Practice

Spectatoring — anxiously monitoring whether an erection is occurring — activates *exactly* the neurological systems that prevent it. Mindfulness trains attention back to sensation and presence. Daily 10-minute mindfulness practice, combined with mindful attention during intimacy, has demonstrated significant improvements in erectile function and sexual satisfaction.

05 Lifestyle Optimization

Cardiovascular fitness, healthy weight, smoking cessation, reduced alcohol, and quality sleep all directly support erectile function. Pelvic floor physical therapy has also shown benefit for erectile function and ejaculatory control in research trials.

06 Partner Communication

Shame and silence make erectile difficulties worse. Opening the conversation with a partner — with vulnerability rather than defensiveness — reduces the relational pressure that amplifies anxiety. Frame it as something you're navigating together, not a performance you're failing.

A Word on Pornography

Pornography-induced erectile dysfunction (PIED) is increasingly recognized. Frequent pornography use *can* desensitize the brain's reward system and create a pattern where real-partner intimacy becomes less arousing. A 90-day abstinence period, combined with therapy, often produces significant improvement.

When to Seek Additional Support

If erectile difficulties are persistent, distressing, or significantly impacting your relationship or self-esteem, sex therapy, individually or as a couple, is highly effective. You do not need to manage this alone