

Talking to your patients about Erectile Dysfunction

Helpful tips for starting the conversation

Many men will feel too embarrassed to discuss erectile dysfunction (ED), or any sexual health issue with their doctor. They are often unaware that something like ED is a common condition that you see often in your clinical practice.

Below are some tips to help shape your approach with patients who begin to discuss this issue with you.

Make your patient feel comfortable

Develop a rapport with your patient before delving into any sensitive questions to help your patient feel more comfortable and open up more. When discussing their sex life, use terms such as 'partner' to ensure inclusivity.

Ensure to normalise the problem

Many men will feel alone in their experience with ED, as well as embarrassed or ashamed and will feel uncomfortable in broaching the topic of ED with you.

It will help the patient if you normalise the problem. Begin by putting the patient at ease by emphasising how common ED is and how it's completely normal to find it difficult to talk about. This can help open up the conversation.

For example:

- *"Many men find it difficult to talk about ED but it's a very common complaint and I have seen many patients before with the same problem."*
- *"From around the age of 40, ED gets more and more common. Did you know around 40% of men in their 40's are thought to have ED and this rises to around 70% in men over the age of 70?"^{1,2}*

Be clear and transparent

Provide clear explanations for any questions you ask your patient around their ED and rephrase any questions your patient seems to be reluctant to answer. Reassure them that you are asking to help with their diagnosis and to find a solution to their problem. Emphasis that everything you discuss is strictly private and confidential.

Allow time for questions

Leave some time throughout the discussion to ask your patient if they have any questions for you and again ask them at the end of the appointment if they have any final questions or anything else they would like to discuss. Encourage them to get back in touch if they have more questions when they get home.

What if I suspect that one of my patients may have ED?

Many patients present with symptoms of ED or with risk factors which prompt screening. You may want to touch on the subject with them and give them the avenue to open up about their condition.

As a reminder, ED is associated with; **older age**, **psychological issues** such as anxiety, depression or stress, **use of drugs** including opioids, corticosteroids, antidepressants and antacids, **comorbidities** such as diabetes, obesity and hyperlipidemia and **traumas** such as pelvic breaks and spinal cord injuries and **neurological** conditions such as multiple sclerosis.^{1,3,4}

You can open up discussion in several ways.

A passive approach to let patients know sexual health is a legitimate conversation they can have with you could include leaving leaflets about sex-related topics and ED in your waiting room, and perhaps hanging educational posters in some areas in the surgery.⁵

To take a more active approach, consider printing copies of a questionnaire such as the Sexual Health Inventory for Men⁶. They can complete this alone or with you during the appointment and this will give you some basis for your conversation with them.

Opening the conversation

Below are a few suggestions of openers you can use to begin the conversation with someone you think may experience ED.

- *“I’m going to ask you a few questions about your sexual health. Since sexual health is very important to overall health, I ask all my patients these questions.”*
- *“Sexual health concerns are a common issue for men. Please let me know if you ever would like to discuss this and we can certainly set some time.”*

At the beginning of an appointment, you could add:

“Before I begin, do you have any questions or sexual concerns you’d like to discuss?”

Because ED can be associated with more serious health conditions, it’s key to emphasise the importance of talking to you or another healthcare professional if they experience any problems.

References

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