

What to Know About Erectile Dysfunction in Younger Men

Advice for People in Their 20s and 30s

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Key Takeaways

- Erectile dysfunction in men under 40 may be due to physical causes, emotional causes, or both.
- Smoking and recreational drug use are key risk factors for ED in men under 40.
- A healthy lifestyle, including a nutritious diet, regular exercise, and quitting cigarettes, can help improve ED symptoms.

[Erectile dysfunction \(ED\)](#) is a condition commonly associated with older age, but one that can affect younger men as well. Although the symptoms are largely the same, the severity and causes are often strikingly different from those in older men.

While ED in younger men is treatable, the condition may be a sign of an underlying health condition, such as early heart disease.¹ If experiencing ED at any age—but especially if you are in your teens or 20s—it's important to speak with a doctor as the cause can sometimes be serious.²

Here's what you should know about ED in younger men, including the possible causes and ways to treat this all-too-common condition.

How Common Is ED in Younger Men?

Erectile dysfunction (ED) is a condition that typically affects men over the age of 40.³ By this age, men have a roughly 40% chance of having some form of ED—whether mild, moderate, or severe. For every decade thereafter, the risk increases by 10%.⁴

Men under 40 are also significantly affected. According to a 2013 study in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 26% of ED cases—roughly one in four—occur in men 40 and under.⁵

The study also noted that younger men who seek treatment are more likely to have severe ED than those over 40 (48.8% vs. 40%).⁵

The reasons for this are not always clear. On the one hand, younger men with ED have a higher [testosterone count](#) and [fewer comorbid medical conditions](#) than their older counterparts. They also have a lower [body mass index \(BMI\)](#).⁵

On the other hand, younger men have higher rates of smoking and illicit drug use, both of which are known risk factors for ED.⁶ They are also less likely to seek treatment than older men.⁷

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), around 30 million men in the United States—roughly one in five—have some form of erectile dysfunction.⁸

Why ED Can Occur at a Younger Age

An erection is a complex physiological response involving the brain, hormones, nerves, muscles, and circulatory system. A breakdown in any of these systems can lead to ED.

The causes of ED are broadly categorized as being physical (organic) and psychological (psychogenic). In most cases, more than one factor is involved.⁹

While ED in younger men was once thought to be almost exclusively psychogenic, recent research suggests that 15% to 72% of cases involve a wholly organic cause.¹⁰

Organic Causes

Organic causes of ED include any condition that affects the physiologic ability to achieve or sustain an erection.

In men under 40, these include:²

- **Endocrinologic disorders** like [diabetes](#), [hypogonadism](#), [hyperthyroidism](#), [hypothyroidism](#), and [Klinefelter's syndrome](#).
- **Neurologic conditions** like [epilepsy](#), [multiple sclerosis](#), and spinal cord trauma
- **Vascular conditions** like [Peyronie's disease](#), [peripheral artery disease \(PAD\)](#), and early [coronary artery disease \(CAD\)](#)
- **Medications**, including certain antidepressants, anticonvulsants, antipsychotics, and opioids

Smoking and recreational drug use (particularly cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine) are also key risk factors in younger men. While heavy alcohol use may also play a part, its relation to ED in younger men is uncertain.¹⁰

Psychogenic Causes

Negative emotions and moods can also impair your ability to achieve or maintain an erection. In some cases, these psychogenic factors may be the sole cause of ED.¹¹

Even if the primary cause is organic, the emotional stress a person with ED can endure can make the condition worse.¹¹

Younger men are especially vulnerable to psychogenic ED because they are often expected to be more "virile" than their older counterparts.¹¹

Psychogenic causes of ED include:¹²

- Depression
- Family or social pressures
- Low self-esteem

- Mental health problems like schizophrenia
- [Performance anxiety](#)
- Psychological trauma
- Relationship problems

How ED in Young Men Is Diagnosed

Because ED is less common in younger men, doctors will often perform a more extensive diagnosis.

In addition to a physical exam, the doctor will review your medical and family history to check for any risk factors (such as diabetes and hypertension). They will also ask about any drugs you take, whether prescription, over-the-counter (OTC), or recreational.¹²

The doctor will also want details about when the problem started, how severe it is, and what is going on in your life. These questions can help establish whether the primary cause is organic or psychogenic.

For instance, the abrupt onset of ED or intermittent episodes of ED are more suggestive of a psychogenic cause, while the gradual onset of ED or constant ED is more indicative of an organic cause.¹²

Your doctor may also order the following tests and procedures:¹²

- **Blood and urine tests** to check for signs of heart disease, diabetes, thyroid disease, and hormone problems (including low testosterone)
- **Penile duplex [ultrasonography](#)**, an imaging test performed with an erection to visualize blood flow in and out of the penis
- **Penile [angiography](#)**, a form of X-ray using an injected contrast dye to visualize penile blood circulation
- **Combined intra-cavernous injection and stimulation (CIS) test**, a simple in-office test using an injected drug and either manual or visual stimulation to assess the quality of an erection
- **Nocturnal penile tumescence (NPT) stamp test**, a simple at-home test where four to six postage stamps are wrapped around the shaft of your penis to check if you get nighttime erections (evidenced by a tear or break in the stamps)
- **RigiScan**, a device similar to NPT that uses a series of looped sensors to measure the engorgement and rigidity of your penis while asleep

If the cause is thought to be psychogenic, your doctor might refer you to a psychologist for further evaluation.

How to Fix ED at a Younger Age

[ED treatments](#) commonly used in older people can also be used in younger people. Depending on the cause, this may involve a combination of lifestyle changes, counseling, medications, medical devices, and, in rare cases, surgery.

Lifestyle Modifications

Despite popular belief, being overweight or obese is not inherently linked to ED in younger men, partly because their stronger cardiovascular systems tend to compensate for any circulatory problems.¹⁰

However, obesity can reduce testosterone levels in some men and further complicate ED symptoms.⁶ Smoking and chronic stress can also contribute.¹⁰

A few simple lifestyle adjustments may help improve the quality of your erections, along with your overall quality of life.

These include:

- [Eating a nutritious diet](#), limiting fatty and processed foods
- Exercising regularly to improve stamina, mood, and circulation¹³
- Quitting cigarettes to improve circulation¹⁰
- Maintaining a healthy weight¹⁴
- [Managing your stress](#)
- Getting plenty of sleep⁶
- Avoiding recreational drugs¹⁰

Medications

There are oral and injectable drugs that can either be used “on demand” or on an ongoing basis to treat ED.

These include:⁹

- [Phosphodiesterase type 5 \(PDE5\) inhibitors](#) like Viagra (sildenafil), Cialis (tadalafil), vardenafil, and Stendra (avanafil) that are taken by mouth
- **Alprostadil**, a drug used five to 20 minutes before sex to induce an erection, delivered either by penile injection (Caverject, Edex, Trimix, Quadmix), penile cream (Vitaros, Virerec), or urethral suppository (MUSE)
- [Testosterone injections](#), used specifically for men with hypogonadism (low testosterone) in whom ED is common

Psychotherapy

Counseling can help people address social and psychological issues related to ED. This may involve:

- [Cognitive-behavioral therapy \(CBT\)](#)
- [Mindfulness-based therapy \(MBT\)](#)
- **Couples counseling**
- **Sex therapy**

A 2014 study in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* reported that counseling paired with a PDE5 inhibitor improved outcomes in men with ED better than either treatment on its own.¹⁵

Penile Pumps

A [penile vacuum pump](#), purchased online or in sex shops, can be an option for people who continue to struggle with ED despite medications and lifestyle changes.

The device consists of a cylinder that is placed over the penis and a manual or electric pump that extracts air from the cylinder. The resulting vacuum draws blood into the penis, causing engorgement.¹⁶

An [elastic band \(erection ring, cock ring\)](#) can then be placed around the base of the penis behind the [scrotum](#) to maintain the erection.

Surgery

If all other treatment options fail, surgery may be an option. These procedures are especially beneficial when ED is associated with advanced diabetes, vascular disease, and spinal cord injury.¹¹

The most common surgical approach is [penile implant surgery](#). This procedure either involves a malleable implant (offering permanent firmness) or an inflatable implant (offering on-demand erections).¹²

Another surgical option is microsurgical penile revascularization. This complicated surgery is mostly used in men under 40 who have sustained a traumatic penile injury. It restores blood flow by connecting an artery in the abdomen to one at the top of the penis.¹²

Complementary and Alternative Therapies

Although many [natural remedies](#) claim to improve erections, few are strongly supported by research. Among some that show promise are:¹⁷

- [Ginseng root \(*Panax ginseng*\)](#)
- Puncture vine (*Tribulus terrestris*)
- Pycnogenol (a homeopathic remedy made from the bark of the French maritime pine tree)
- Prelox (a supplement containing pycnogenol and [L-arginine](#))

It is unclear how these remedies work, but it is thought that they might stimulate nitric oxide production, which the body uses to induce erections.¹⁷

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