



Understanding Erectile Dysfunction and the role of Physiotherapy

Erectile dysfunction (ED) or impotence is the inability to achieve or maintain an erection that allows penetrative sexual activity. It is not a disease, but a symptom of another problem (physical, psychological or a mixture of both). Occasional failure to get/keep an erection is normal, however if the problem persists, you should seek medical advice.

Most men (approximately 20% of men under 40 years and 50% of men over 40 years old) will experience episodes in their lifetime which can have a significant negative impact but it can be treated successfully.

Common causes are stress and other psychological factors, prostate surgery, vascular disease, hormonal problems, and pelvic floor dysfunction. Treatment of ED is based on the underlying cause, options include

- Lifestyle changes such as losing weight, getting enough sleep, drinking less, and stopping smoking
- Physiotherapy
- Use of a penile vacuum device
- Talking therapies
- Medication

Pelvic Floor Not Just for Women

Pelvic floor muscles can become weak or they can have a higher resting tone or overactivity. Both can affect erectile function in different ways. Pelvic

floor muscles can weaken with age, inactivity and following prostate surgery. When this happens, the muscles don't engage enough to maintain an erection and may have weakened contraction during ejaculation.

Pelvic floor muscles can become overactive in men with chronic pelvic pain or prostatitis. This results in a 'tight' pelvic floor which may restrict blood flow into the shaft of the penis and put pressure on nerves that supply sensation to the penis.

Physiotherapy Help

A detailed assessment by a qualified physiotherapist will determine if the pelvic floor muscles are the cause. Pelvic physiotherapy includes exercise, activity modification, diet, manual therapy and education. Real time ultrasound will help assess and teach you how to isolate your pelvic floor muscles effectively. Shockwave therapy (SWT) has also been found to be an effective treatment for ED, a non-invasive therapy using low-frequency, acoustic shockwaves generated via a handheld device to improve flow to the penis and improve erection quality.

About the author

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