



# Erectile Dysfunction: Sexual Health for Cancer Survivors

*Urology Care*  
FOUNDATION™  
*The Official Foundation of the  
American Urological Association*

## WHAT CAUSES ED AFTER CANCER TREATMENT?

Many men have sexual health problems following their cancer diagnosis or treatments. Yet, very few seek help for their erectile dysfunction (ED). ED is when a man finds it hard to get or keep an erection that's firm enough for sex. ED happens when there is not enough blood flow to the penis, or when nerves to the penis are harmed.

Cancer in the prostate, colon, rectum and bladder are the most common cancers that can affect a man's sexual health. Surgery or radiation to treat these cancers can lead to ED. Also, chemotherapy to treat cancers outside the pelvis may cause low testosterone (low "T"). These treatments, or low T, along with emotional stress, can also lead to ED.

The good news for cancer survivors is that you do not have to live with ED. Talk with your healthcare provider about ED treatments.

## WHO IS MOST LIKELY TO HAVE ED AFTER TREATMENT?

Erections are rarely the same after cancer treatment. Cancer treatment can impact the blood flow and nerves to the penis. Fortunately, men can regain natural erections. In some men, recovery may take 12–24 months.

ED after cancer treatment depends on:

- Your age
- Your general health history (hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, peripheral artery disease, smoking)

- Medicines you take
- Erectile function before treatment
- Cancer stage
- Damage to your nerves or blood vessels from surgery or radiation

## HOW IS ED TREATED?

There are many options:

- **Vacuum Erection Devices** are pumps to help build and keep an erection; they do not need a prescription.
- **PDE-5 Inhibitors** such as Avanafil, Sildenafil, Tadalafil and Vardenafil increase penile blood flow. A prescription is needed.
- **Testosterone Therapy** may be prescribed to help sex drive if low levels of testosterone are found in blood tests.
- **Intracavernosal (ICI) or Intraurethral (IU) Therapy** involves prescribed drugs you deliver directly to the penis to help blood flow for an erection. This is an option for men who don't or can't respond well to PDE-5 inhibitors.
- **Surgery** including penile implants should be done by a urologist experienced with penile surgery. Penile implants are very helpful for cancer survivors.
- **Dietary Supplements** ("herbal remedies") are popular, but may not be safe or even work. Check with your healthcare provider before you take any to self-treat your ED. The FDA warns consumers not to use unapproved

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drugs for ED: <https://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm465024.htm>

## THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- Talk with your partner about your ED as well as your options.
- Check with your insurance company to learn what treatments it will or will not cover.
- Ask for an expert opinion from provider who specializes in sexual dysfunction.
- If you're interested in surgery, ask the penile implant surgeon if you can talk with someone they've helped so you can learn more.
- For symptoms of depression, anxiety or for couples counselling, ask your doctor for a referral of a mental health specialist.
- If one treatment doesn't work, ask about another.

## About the Urology Care Foundation

The Urology Care Foundation is the world's leading urologic foundation – and the official foundation of the American Urological Association. We provide information for those actively managing their urologic health and those ready to make health changes. Our information is based on the American Urological Association resources and is reviewed by medical experts.

To learn more, visit the Urology Care Foundation's website, [UrologyHealth.org/UrologicConditions](https://UrologyHealth.org/UrologicConditions) or go to [UrologyHealth.org/FindAUrologist](https://UrologyHealth.org/FindAUrologist) to find a doctor near you.

## Disclaimer:

This information is not a tool for self-diagnosis or a substitute for professional medical advice. It is not to be used or relied on for that purpose. Please talk to your urologists or healthcare provider about your health concerns. Always consult a healthcare provider before you start or stop any treatments, including medications.

For copies of printed materials about ED and other urologic conditions, visit [UrologyHealth.org/Order](https://UrologyHealth.org/Order) or call 800-828-7866.