



ILLUSTRATION BY CLAIRE SHORROCK

Sexual health – sorted!

In a way, sexual health is the pinnacle of good health – we are most likely to have a fab sex life when we are robustly fit and feeling happy. Naturopath Tania Flack reports.

SEXUAL health is the icing on the cake of good health and an important part of happy relationships. However, when things start to go wrong we often ignore them due to embarrassment or just accept that poor sexual health is just part of ageing. While aspects of our sexual health may gradually change as we age, we should all expect to have fulfilling sex lives into our older years as long as our general health is good. That said, most people at some stage in their lives will experience one of the many common conditions that affect sexual health. These range from problems with libido to infertility. People may not necessarily consider natural medicines when things go wrong ‘downstairs’ however there are a range of effective treatment options.

Impotence

Impotence, or erectile dysfunction, is the inability to achieve and maintain an erection sufficient to fully complete satisfactory intercourse. This can have a significant long-term impact on confidence, self-esteem and relationships. Impotence is common and is estimated to affect around 13 percent of 40-49 year old men, with the statistics climbing as men age to 69 percent of 70-79 year olds. The causes of impotence are varied and although men may feel embarrassed talking about

their sexual performance, they should speak to their health care practitioner if symptoms of erectile dysfunction are present for longer than a month, as early intervention can lead to faster recovery and it can be an early warning sign of other conditions. For example, erectile dysfunction may stem from physical problems that interfere with blood flow to the penis, such as cardiovascular disease or diabetes.

Natural medicine, including dietary and lifestyle interventions, can significantly improve metabolic function, lower blood pressure and cholesterol, reduce inflammation, promote weight loss and improve insulin sensitivity, all of which ultimately improve erectile function. Nutritional intervention is essential and will focus on lots of vegetables, fruit, legumes, seafood and poultry, low amounts of red meat and avoiding processed carbohydrates, sugar, caffeine and alcohol. Herbs and supplements are prescribed on an individual basis and may include: vitamin B3, essential fatty acids, garlic and plant polyphenols (to lower cholesterol), magnesium, coenzyme Q10, hawthorn, lime tree and withania (to lower blood

Sexual health is like the canary in the coal mine: if there’s a problem, it may signal other health issues, too.

* Keep the swimmers happy

Antioxidant-rich foods to improve egg and sperm quality include:

- **Lycopene** - tomatoes, guava, watermelon, parsley, basil, asparagus, red cabbage, turmeric, chillies, grapefruit, persimmons
- **Vitamin C** - blackcurrant juice, guava, banana, blackberries, red chilli peppers, red capsicums, green capsicums, parsley, watercress, cabbage, strawberries, papaya, rockmelon, citrus fruits, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, snow peas
- **Selenium** - Brazil nuts, mushrooms, egg yolks, rice flour, oat bran, oats, mustard powder, sesame seeds, tahini, fish

pressure) and cinnamon, gymnema, goat's rue and chromium (to improve insulin sensitivity).

Damage to nerves caused by lower back injuries or surgery to prostate, bladder or bowel may also cause impotence. Herbs that support nerve repair include St John's wort and bacopa, while high dose essential fatty acids and phosphatidylserine help to promote nerve repair. Vitamin D is also important, and animal studies have demonstrated that supplemental vitamin D enhances nerve repair. Most men have had occasional impotence caused by stress, fatigue or excessive consumption of alcohol or other drugs. While this is usually transient it can lead to anxiety, which in itself can perpetuate the problem. This performance anxiety is a common cause of impotence and treatment may involve counselling along with relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises, meditation, tai chi

or yoga. Herbal medicines, including anxiolytics such as skullcap, passionflower and zizyphus and nervous system tonics such as damiana, oats and withania, are particularly beneficial.

A good way to determine if erectile dysfunction is caused by psychological problems as opposed to physical problems is to take note if men still experience erections on waking; if so, it's likely to be caused by psychological factors. Drugs such as alcohol and marijuana can cause erectile dysfunction and should be avoided. Some medications also cause impotence, if you are taking prescribed medicines and experiencing problems, speak to your doctor.

Low libido

This is one of the most common causes of sexual problems in both men and women, and it can lead to significant relationship stress. Many factors contribute to a robust libido, including healthy hormone balance, good energy levels, and emotional health. Hormone imbalance can cause low libido, particularly low testosterone, which is a key hormone associated with sex drive. Both men and women produce testosterone, although it is present in much lower levels in women. We associate high testosterone levels with young men, however even they can sometimes have low levels, so testing is important, no matter your gender or age, if you have low libido.

Herbal medicines that support healthy testosterone production include Korean ginseng, saw palmetto, sarsaparilla and damiana. Tribulus is also used to improve testosterone levels and libido and has been shown to boost testosterone levels in animal studies on primates by 52 percent. Herbal medicine is prescribed on an individual basis; consult your naturopath or herbalist for professional advice.

Depression is perhaps one of the most common causes of low libido: not only do we withdraw from the people we love when depressed, but we also become less able to experience pleasure, including sexual pleasure, which is a deadly combination when it comes to libido. Unfortunately, standard medical treatment for depression, while very effective, often lowers libido further, so it can be a catch-22 when

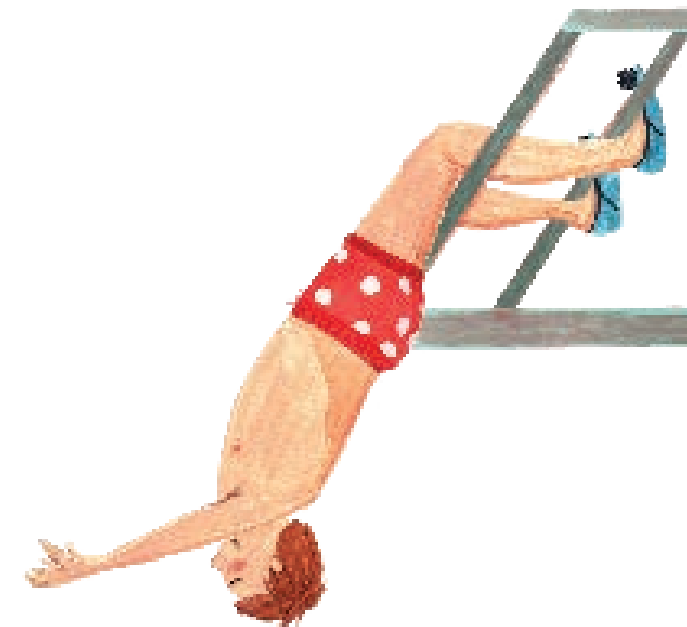
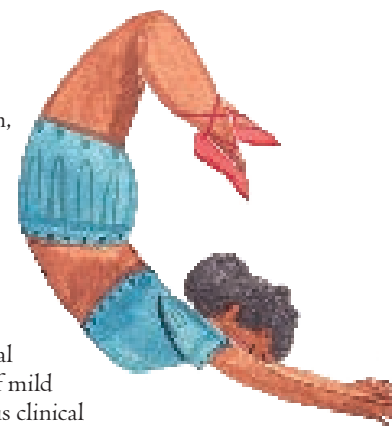
deciding on treatment. Nutrients that act as precursors to serotonin, such as S-adenosylmethionine, commonly referred to as SAME, and 5-hydroxy tryptophan can improve symptoms of depression. St John's wort is perhaps the most well-known herb used to treat depression; it has been shown to be as effective as standard medical antidepressants for the treatment of mild to moderate depression in numerous clinical trials, without causing a loss of libido. Depression always needs professional assessment and support. Natural medicines can be very effective for low libido associated with depression; however, they are contraindicated if you are taking medical antidepressants, so consult your health practitioner.

Then there are a range of common, everyday issues that impact libido. These include general fatigue, working long hours, running around after children and not having enough time to yourself. If the body's fight-or-flight mechanisms are triggered due to the continuous multi-tasking involved with a busy modern life, we can actually shut down the signals that tell us that now is a good time to have sex. After all, on a basic physiological level, sex is all about reproduction, so the body will down-regulate those urges if it is being sent messages that it is unsafe to reproduce. So reducing stress, making sure you get enough time to yourself and spending some quality time reconnecting with your partner is sometimes all that's needed.

Cystitis

This makes it onto our list as it can be initiated with sex. Commonly known as the 'honeymooner's disease', cystitis refers to urinary tract infection, which causes painful burning on urination. While you don't have to have sex to get cystitis, sex can certainly increase your chances of getting it. This most commonly affects women, due to their shorter urethras. During sex, bacteria can make their way into the urethra and from there, into the bladder, causing painful infection and inflammation of the delicate tissues.

You can protect yourself by drinking plenty of water and urinating immediately after sex, which helps to flush out bacteria. It is also important that you always wipe from front to back after going to the toilet, to avoid exposure to bacteria. Cranberry juice is a great urinary antiseptic and helps to block bacteria from adhering to the bladder wall. Clinical trials show that regular consumption reduces the risk of cystitis by around 50 percent. Herbal medicine such as couch grass, celery seed, uva ursi, crataeva and buchu are also effective, especially if started at the first sign of burning urination. *



* The riddle of infertility

It is estimated that infertility effects one in every six couples in Australia. There are many conditions that cause infertility, however two stand out from the rest.

Poor sperm quality

Men can appear completely healthy and yet still have poor quality sperm. Sperm are the most delicate cells in the body and are vulnerable to damage from toxins and oxidative stress. The three main issues associated with poor sperm quality are low count, high morphology (abnormal sperm) and low motility (poor movement), all of which respond beautifully to natural medicine. Herbal medicine has been used for centuries to improve sperm quality. Withania, a herb traditionally used for fertility, significantly improves semen parameters. Studies show that taking 675mg of withania a day for three months lead to a 167 percent increase in sperm count, a 53 percent increase in semen volume and 57 percent increase in sperm motility. Korean ginseng, another important herb for male fertility, has been shown to significantly increase total sperm count and improve motility in several animal studies.

High morphology is a direct result of oxidative stress caused by exposure to everyday toxins and poor diet and lifestyle choices. Antioxidant protection is the key to improving this and men should ensure they have a high intake of antioxidant rich foods such as berries, colourful fruits and vegetables, green tea, legumes, nuts and seeds. Supplementing with powerful antioxidants such as turmeric, co enzyme

Q10, resveratrol and selenium also significantly reduces sperm morphology. Good sperm motility is essential for fertility. A recent study found that men with a high dietary intake of vitamin C and lycopene-rich foods had significantly higher sperm motility.

Polycystic ovarian syndrome

Polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) is a common hormonal problem and one of the leading causes of female infertility. This complex endocrine disorder is caused by a number of driving factors including hormonal imbalance and a genetic tendency towards blood sugar problems and often involves adrenal disruption. Stress can play a triggering role in PCOS, especially if it presents later in life. The symptoms vary for each individual and may include irregular menstrual cycle and infrequent ovulation, weight gain, insulin resistance, acne, excess hair growth, and multiple cysts on the ovary.

Natural medicine provides effective support for women suffering from PCOS. Focus is placed on dietary intervention and adopting a fresh, whole foods diet and strictly avoiding all processed carbohydrates and sugars. Regular exercise is essential. Re-establishing regular ovulation using herbal medicine is key. Peony and licorice in combination has been used for thousands of years in traditional Chinese medicine, and works to regulate hormones, promote ovulation and reduce the androgen-like effects of PCOS. Other herbs that may be useful include false unicorn root, shatavari, black cohosh, hops or chaste tree.

Tania Flack is a respected naturopath specialising in women's health and hormonal disorders. www.taniaflack.com



Depression is the most common cause of low libido – and conventional antidepressants further subdue desire and sensation, making matters worse.