

New drug addresses premature ejaculation

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Until now, it's been a sexual problem shrouded in taboo.

Judging from the ubiquitous advertisements for Viagra and its sister medicines on television, you'd think the most common sexual problem for men was erectile dysfunction, or ED as it's now commonly known.

It isn't.

The biggest dysfunction bedeviling the bedroom for many men -- some studies say up to one-third -- is premature ejaculation, or PE. But with the upcoming debut of a new medical treatment that seeks to treat this thorny affliction, the veil of secrecy and shame that surrounds PE will likely lift as the inevitable direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical ads proliferate.

The new drug is called dapoxetine. It's a closely related (but chemically different) member of the class of antidepressants called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, which includes medications such as Zoloft and Prozac.

In the past decade, SSRIs have been used "off-label" to treat PE, given that a common side effect of these drugs is delayed orgasm.

But dapoxetine, which could receive FDA approval by the end of the year, is the first prescription drug being developed specifically to treat early ejaculators. And it offers several advantages over traditional SSRIs.

"The problem with drugs like Paxil and Zoloft is that it takes about six hours for the drug to reach maximum concentration in the blood," says Dr. LeRoy Jones, a urologist with Urology San Antonio, which participated in studies of dapoxetine. "It's hard trying to plan sexual intercourse up to six hours in advance. You also have to take the older SSRIs every day."

The new drug works faster and can be taken as needed, like Viagra.

The only downside of dapoxetine is that since users don't take it every day, their bodies may not get used to the possible side effects, which can include gastrointestinal disturbance and diarrhea.

For many men, the risks may be worth it.

"A man may say, 'Gosh, I used to ejaculate after 30 seconds; now I'm up to five minutes,'" says Jones. "To them this is a tremendous benefit and they'll just deal with the side effects."

The causes of PE remain a mystery. There are two kinds: lifelong (affecting about two-thirds of men with PE) and acquired, which is easier to treat.

"For years we thought (PE) was a psychological problem, but now people feel it's physiological," says Jones. "Something is just wired wrong in these patients, especially the ones with lifelong PE."

PE may be slightly more common among younger men, but it's a myth that older patients aren't also affected. And while PE is widespread, studies suggest fewer than 12 percent of men ever seek treatment for it.

Some have argued that PE could be an adaptive trait: Caveman ancestors who could ejaculate quickly might have had a higher chance of survival, since they spent less time in the vulnerable position of coitus.

But what constitutes PE?

It's difficult to pinpoint the "average" length of time a man should be able to have intercourse without having an orgasm, says Jones, but typically those with PE tend to ejaculate in less than a minute of penetration, sometimes even before penetrating. Studies suggest the average among "normal" men is five to seven minutes. With dapoxetine, patients were able to extend their time to as long as four or five minutes.

"That may not sound like a lot, but if all they know is a minute, five minutes is considerably longer," he says.

Before the advent of SSRIs, treatment for PE was limited to numbing creams (not good, since they numbed your partner, too) and the use of condoms to decrease sensation. Behavioral modification procedures such as the "squeeze technique," pioneered by sex gurus Masters and Johnson, provide some success but require a committed partner.

Dapoxetine, developed by Johnson & Johnson -- several other drug companies are also working on compounds of their own -- could revolutionize the landscape.

Experts say the benefits could extend beyond a man's ability to delay orgasm and into improving his relationship with his partner. Women take on average 15 to 20 minutes to reach orgasm; Jones says many men with PE feel guilty about not being able to give their wives or girlfriends the proper stimulation. In turn, a partner may view a man's early ejaculating as being "selfish."

"The woman may interpret (an inability to delay orgasm) as 'He doesn't care about me or my needs,'" says Dr. Harry Croft, a psychiatrist in private practice in San Antonio. "This can subsequently get in the way of the whole relationship."

Delaying orgasm, then, could bring an emotional closeness in the relationship.

"Obviously, if the guy is able to have intercourse longer, at least it appears that he's trying," explains Jones.

But, really, what does dapoxetine mean for women?

"The more ejaculatory control he has, the better off she is," says Laura Berman, a sexuality expert and director of the Berman Center in Chicago. "Certainly the more stimulation a woman has, the better."

Jones says that the debut of dapoxetine will probably also usher in an influx of more "natural," over-the-counter herbal treatments for PE, just as it has for ED. What's unknown is how many men without PE will use the drug "recreationally," just as men without ED have toyed with Viagra to heighten their already normal sexual experience.

Jones is eager to see how the drug advertisements will portray the problem of PE, and how the public will react.

"Talking about ejaculation is a little risqué," he says. "It will be interesting to see how it all shakes out."

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