

Priapism

Priapism is a persistent and often painful erection that lasts for several hours. It is a medical emergency that has a good outcome if it is treated early.

This information sheet will help you understand more about priapism. It is not a substitute for talking with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

What is priapism?

Priapism is a persistent, often painful, penile erection lasting more than four hours that is not associated with sexual interest or stimulation.

It can occur in men of any age (including adolescents) when blood in the penis becomes trapped.

There are three types of priapism:

- low blood flow (ischaemic)
- high blood flow (arterial)
- recurrent or intermittent (stuttering).

The most common and serious type is low blood flow priapism.

How common is priapism?

Priapism is rare in the general population. Current estimates show that up to one out of every 100,000 healthy men will experience priapism each year.

Medicines associated with priapism

Medicine type	Examples
Medicines known to increase the risk of priapism	
Medicines for depression and schizophrenia	risperidone, olanzapine, clozapine, chlorpromazine, quetiapine, sertraline, citalopram, escitalopram, lithium, fluoxetine, trifluoperazine, pericazine
Medicines for erectile dysfunction (injections)	alprostadil, papaverine
Medicines for prostate problems	doxazosin, tamsulosin, terazosin, prazosin
Blood pressure medicines	hydralazine, propranolol
Blood thinners	heparin, warfarin
Hormones	testosterone, gonadotropin-releasing hormone
Medicines that may increase the risk of priapism	
Medicines for erectile dysfunction (tablets)	sildenafil, tadalafil
Medicines used for ADHD	methylphenidate, atomoxetine

What should I do if I have a reaction that appears to be priapism?

Priapism is a medical emergency. It is important that you seek immediate medical attention if you experience priapism or any erection that lasts longer than four hours with or without sexual stimulation.

The outcome is usually good if priapism is treated early. However, if medical attention is delayed, your penis may be permanently damaged and you may have difficulties getting an erection in the future.

What are the causes of priapism?

Priapism usually results from a problem with the blood flow through the penis.

The known causes or conditions associated with priapism include:

- medicines (see table below; the most common types of medicine that can cause priapism are those used to treat schizophrenia)
- blood disorders (including sickle cell disease, leukaemia)
- metabolic disorders (including amyloidosis, gout)
- recreational drugs (including alcohol, cannabis, cocaine).

However, the cause of priapism is not known in the majority of cases.