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The Facts About Testosterone Depletion in Men

By Kimball Johnson, M.D. and Gloria Carusi, Nurse Practitioner

In males, appropriate levels of the hormone testosterone is critical to the development of male sex organs as well as secondary sex characteristics, such as bone mass and hair growth patterns. Even after a male reaches adulthood, testosterone levels affect his mood, energy, and sexual function. A depletion or deficiency in a man's testosterone level can result in fatigue, joint pain, irritability, and other symptoms. Although testosterone depletion sometimes presents as sexual dysfunction, in many cases the only initial symptoms are changes in mood and/or energy level.

Testosterone deficiency can occur at any age due to a number of causes, including certain injuries, illnesses, and medications; alcoholism; and congenital hormone disorders. Even in otherwise healthy men, however, testosterone levels decrease with age, generally beginning at age 30. This natural testosterone depletion can result in a condition known as hypogonadism, which is sometimes referred to as andropause or male menopause. Men as young as 35 may experience symptoms of testosterone depletion.

While many men fear the impotence and lacking libido associated with age-related testosterone depletion, there are other potentially serious consequences. Some of the most unpleasant side effects of aging in males, including increased abdominal fat, skin atrophy, high blood pressure, and even hemorrhoids, may be linked to testosterone depletion. Testosterone depletion can also lead to the degenerative bone loss known as osteoporosis. Although osteoporosis is often thought of as a woman's disease, it can be equally, if not more, devastating for men: men have a mortality rate of up to three times that of women following hospitalization for a hip fracture.¹

Testosterone depletion can be easily detected by a simple blood test. Any man experiencing unexplained symptoms of fatigue, joint pain, irritability, moodiness, depression, or sexual dysfunction should have his testosterone level checked. Testosterone levels should also be assessed in men seeking Viagra™, Cialis™, Levitra™, or other medications intended to treat erectile dysfunction.

If you are found to have low testosterone levels, testosterone replacement therapy is available in the form of gels, patches, injections, and implants. Your healthcare provider can help you determine the most appropriate treatment method for you. There are some contraindications for testosterone replacement therapy, including high cholesterol and other heart disease risk factors, and prostate cancer. Testosterone replacement therapy should only be undertaken with the supervision of a physician.