

Navigating the Intersection of Hypertension and Erectile Dysfunction: Advances in Diagnosis, Treatment, and Lifestyle Management

Ritu Tiwari, Shivam Verma*, Narsingh Verma, Shraddha Singh, Sudipti Yadav, Nabila Nishat, Anupam Mittal

Department of Physiology, King George's Medical University, Lucknow, UP, India

Abstract

This comprehensive review explores the intricate relationship between hypertension and erectile dysfunction (ED), shedding light on the shared risk factors and underlying physiological mechanisms that connect these two conditions. With a focus on recent advancements, the review discusses diagnostic techniques, lifestyle modifications, medical management, and the complex interplay between antihypertensive medications and ED. It highlights the promise of pelvic computed tomography angiography (CTA) in identifying the vascular origins of ED and the potential of endovascular therapy. The importance of lifestyle changes, including smoking cessation, weight management, and dietary adjustments, in improving both hypertension and erectile function is emphasized. The review also delves into the nuanced effects of various antihypertensive drugs on erectile function, offering a balanced perspective for clinicians and patients. Overall, this review underscores the evolving landscape of ED management and the potential for personalized treatment strategies that address not only symptoms but also the root causes of these conditions, ultimately enhancing both cardiovascular health and sexual well-being.

Keywords: Endovascular therapy, Erectile Dysfunction, Hypertension, sexual well-being

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Introduction

Erectile dysfunction (ED) is characterized by the consistent inability to achieve or sustain an erection necessary for successful vaginal intercourse. This condition affects the well-being of men and their partners. Normal erectile function involves complex neurovascular processes, encompassing nerve stimulation, chemical responses, and vascular activity in the penis. This review delves into the connection between ED and hypertension, specifically exploring recent advancements in diagnosing and managing pelvic arterial insufficiency-related ED using pelvic computed tomography angiography (CTA) and endovascular therapy. Hypertension is prevalent, impacting about 46% of US adults. Despite recommendations for antihypertensive treatment, fewer than 25% effectively manage the condition. This is concerning as hypertension contributes significantly to mortality, primarily due to increased cardiovascular risk and stroke. Hypertension also links to ED, a condition affecting sexual quality of life for both partners. ED involves an inability to achieve or maintain an erection, with a 50% prevalence after age 40. This issue is exacerbated by hypertension, which affects penile blood flow crucial for achieving and maintaining an erection. This complex relationship is influenced by changes in the endothelium, impacting smooth

muscle function and contributing to both conditions' development. The underlying mechanisms connecting hypertension and ED are intertwined, driven by shared pro-contractile pathways and reduced vascular compliance. The immune system's role is also evident in both conditions. Additionally, medications used to treat hypertension can influence erectile function. This review examines established and emerging connections between hypertension and ED, focusing on the signaling network in the penile vasculature and corpora cavernosa, the penis's vascular-like structure.¹⁻³

Epidemiology and Etiology

Typically, erectile dysfunction (ED) affects over 50% of men aged 45 to 75. The global number of people with ED has reached 150 million, projected to rise to 322 million by 2025. A study across five Asian countries revealed a 63% prevalence of ED in men aged 50-80, with over 40% prevalence in Asian men over 40. The initial step in managing the condition involves identifying its root cause: vasculogenic, endocrinologic, neurologic, drug-induced, psychological, mixed, or organ-related. Assessing hormone levels (testosterone, etc.) and penile Doppler examination can help pinpoint the cause. Severe pelvic arterial occlusive disease is indicated by

Corresponding author

Shivam Verma, Department of Physiology, King George's Medical University, Lucknow, UP, India, E-mail: shivam9236@gmail.com

recurrent ulcers or gangrene on the glans penis, but most cases of pelvic arterial insufficiency-related ED lack visible penile morphology changes. The severity of ED can be assessed using the International Index of Erectile Function 5 (IIEF-5) questionnaire, which gauges self-reported sexual function indicators. A difference of ≥ 4 in IIEF-5 score is deemed clinically important in trials. Vasculogenic sources of ED involve impaired smooth muscle relaxation due to endothelial dysfunction, arterial insufficiency from atherosclerotic stenosis, or venous leakage causing poor blood retention in the corpus cavernosa. ED's primary cause in men over 50 is arterial insufficiency. Stenosis in any part of the iliac-pudendal-penile arterial system, the erectile-related arterial axis, can lead to ED. A study involving 629 ED patients, mostly Caucasians, indicated that around 75% of arterial stenoses occurred in the common penile and internal pudendal arteries. Using a pelvic computed tomography angiography (CTA) reconstruction program, pelvic arterial stenosis can be diagnosed non-invasively. This program divides the iliac-pudendal-penile arterial system into eight segments, aiding communication in the field of endovascular therapy. In a Taiwanese study of over 1500 ED patients screened with non-invasive pelvic CTA, approximately 75% of atherosclerotic stenoses were found in the common penile and internal pudendal arteries. This distribution of pelvic arterial stenotic lesions is consistent across Asian and Caucasian populations.^{4,5}

Factors increasing the likelihood of erectile dysfunction in individuals with high blood pressure include:

1. *Hypertension itself:* Elevated blood pressure can damage blood vessels and reduce blood flow to the penis, making it harder to achieve and maintain an erection.
2. *Medication side effects:* Some medications used to manage hypertension can have adverse effects on sexual function, contributing to ED.
3. *Cardiovascular issues:* Hypertension often coexists with other heart and vascular problems that can further impede blood flow to the genitals, leading to erectile issues.
4. *Psychological factors:* The stress and anxiety associated with managing hypertension can negatively impact sexual performance, potentially causing or exacerbating ED.
5. *Lifestyle factors:* Unhealthy lifestyle choices such as smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, and a lack of physical activity can exacerbate both hypertension and ED.
6. *Obesity:* Being overweight or obese is a common risk factor for both hypertension and ED, as it can lead to hormonal imbalances and circulatory problems.
7. *Diabetes:* Hypertensive patients with diabetes face an elevated risk of ED due to the combined impact of these two conditions on nerve and blood vessel health.
8. *Age:* Aging itself can contribute to ED, and hypertensive individuals may be more susceptible to this issue as they grow older.
9. *Hormonal imbalances:* Hypertension can disrupt the balance of hormones in the body, potentially affecting sexual function.

10. *Smoking:* Smoking is a known risk factor for both hypertension and ED, as it constricts blood vessels and reduces blood flow.

It's important for individuals with hypertension to be aware of these risk factors and seek medical guidance to manage their condition and address any associated ED concerns.⁶⁻⁸

Relationship between Erectile Dysfunction and Hypertension

Understanding the intricate balance between vasoconstrictors and vasodilators provides insights into the underlying mechanisms of both hypertension and ED. Targeting these pathways offers potential therapeutic avenues for managing these conditions and restoring vascular and sexual health. Hypertension and ED are closely linked due to the release of vasoconstrictor molecules. Key vasoconstrictors like Angiotensin II (AngII), Endothelin 1 (ET-1), and aldosterone are released in excess in hypertensive individuals. The prolonged release of these vasoconstrictors leads to endothelial dysfunction in blood vessels and the erectile tissue, contributing to a pro-contractile state.

1. Angiotensin II (AngII) Effects:

- AngII triggers oxidative stress and reduces the availability of nitric oxide (NO), which is vital for vasodilation.
- The diminished NO availability impairs NO-mediated vasodilation and promotes smooth muscle contraction, contributing to both hypertension and ED.
- AngII also activates the RhoA/Rho-kinase pathway, which independently affects penile erection.⁹

2. Role of Endothelin 1 (ET-1):

- Elevated levels of ET-1 in hypertension activate NADPH oxidase, leading to the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and a procontractile state.
- ET-1's impact on calcium mobilization and the RhoA/Rho-kinase pathway exacerbates penile contraction and dysfunction.¹⁰

3. Aldosterone and its Connection to ED:

- Aldosterone, known for its role in blood pressure regulation, also contributes to ED.
- Aldosterone induces ROS production and inflammatory cytokines in penile tissue.
- It inhibits NO production and interacts with mineralocorticoid receptors, affecting erectile function and potentially worsening ED.¹¹

4. Vasodilators and their Challenges:

- Hypertension leads to a reduction in the availability of vasodilators like nitric oxide (NO) and hydrogen sulfide (H₂S), which are essential for vascular health and erectile function.
- Reduced NO availability hampers vasodilation and erectile function.
- H₂S plays a compensatory role in cavernosal relaxation during NO deficiency, but reduced H₂S production in hypertensive conditions impairs this mechanism.^{12,13}

5. Ang(1-7) and Nrf2 as Potential Targets:

- Ang(1-7), a counterregulatory peptide, acts through the Mas receptor to promote vasodilation and NO-dependent relaxation, potentially countering the pro-constrictive effects of vasoconstrictors.
- The transcription factor Nrf2, activated by oxidative stress, enhances antioxidant defenses and NO production. Activating Nrf2 shows promise in improving endothelial and erectile function.^{14,15}

Erectile Dysfunction Management

a) Imaging studies

A commonly used non-invasive diagnostic technique for vasculogenic ED involves injecting a vasodilator and using Doppler ultrasound imaging to assess blood flow. However, this method has limitations as it doesn't fully depict the arterial system leading to the penis and can induce stress. To overcome this, researchers are turning to pelvic computed tomography angiography (CTA) as an alternative. CTA can map the internal pudendal artery, including the common penile artery, without injections. This widens its role in ED diagnosis of arterial problems. CTA guides interventions better, reducing time and contrast material needed. It can identify stenosis-related issues, though not calcification or thrombus in penile arteries. Studies in Asian and Caucasian populations suggest over 70% of ED men above 50 have obstructive lesions in the iliac-pudendal-penile arterial system. These lesions often occur in the distal internal pudendal and common penile arteries within the pelvic floor, consistently across races. With technological advancements, endovascular therapy can now address issues in these arteries with varying diameters.¹⁶⁻¹⁹

b) Lifestyle Modifications

Clinical trials have provided evidence that lifestyle modifications offer clinical advantages in addressing erectile dysfunction (ED). Several measures are particularly effective in reducing hypertension, the risk of ED, and the likelihood of cardiovascular complications linked to hypertension.

- **Smoking Cessation:** Quitting smoking has been shown to have a positive impact on ED. Smoking cessation improves overall vascular health, which can enhance erectile function.
- **Weight Reduction and Maintenance:** Maintaining a healthy weight is crucial for both ED and hypertension management. Weight loss and maintaining a healthy weight can lead to improved erectile function in obese individuals.
- **Regular Physical Exercise:** Engaging in regular physical activity has proven benefits for both ED and hypertension. Exercise improves blood circulation, cardiovascular health, and overall well-being, all of which contribute to better erectile function.
- **Moderation of alcohol consumption:** Limiting alcohol intake is advised for individuals with both ED and hypertension. Excessive alcohol consumption can negatively affect sexual function and exacerbate hypertension.
- **Dietary changes:** Dietary modifications play a pivotal role in managing ED and hypertension. A Mediterranean diet, rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy

fats, has been found to be beneficial for individuals with both conditions. Such a diet can improve vascular health and support better erectile function.

- **Salt consumption:** Reducing salt intake is important for managing hypertension. Excess salt can lead to high blood pressure, which in turn affects vascular health and can contribute to ED.

Overall, making lifestyle changes can significantly improve both erectile function and hypertension management. Encouraging practices like quitting smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, engaging in regular physical activity, adopting a balanced diet, and moderating alcohol and salt consumption can have positive effects on overall health and quality of life.^{20,21}

c) Medical Management

In terms of pharmacotherapy for erectile dysfunction (ED), the 2018 American Urological Association Erectile Dysfunction Guidelines stress the importance of a shared decision-making approach when discussing treatment options with ED patients. One commonly prescribed class of medications is Phosphodiesterase-5 (PDE5) inhibitors. These medications are favoured by clinicians due to their ability to enhance blood flow in the penile arteries and improve endothelial function. PDE5 inhibitors are appreciated for their effectiveness, ease of use, and relatively favourable side-effect profile. However, it's crucial to ensure that patients receive proper instruction and counseling regarding their use, including details about when the medication takes effect and the recommendation to take it on an empty stomach. It's important to note that the use of PDE5 inhibitors is not recommended for men who are taking nitrates, and caution should be exercised when using them in combination with alpha-adrenergic blockers due to an increased risk of low blood pressure (hypotension).

It's worth mentioning that approximately 50% of ED patients may not respond well to PDE5 inhibitors or may have contraindications that prevent their use. In such cases, alternative treatment options include:

1. **Vacuum Constriction Device:** This is a non-invasive device that helps create an erection by drawing blood into the penis. It involves the use of a vacuum pump and a constriction ring.
2. **Intracavernosal Injection of Prostaglandin:** In this approach, prostaglandin is injected directly into the penis. This medication helps relax the blood vessels and improve blood flow, promoting an erection.
3. **Penile Prosthesis Implantation:** For patients who do not respond to other treatments or for whom other treatments are not suitable, a penile prosthesis can be surgically implanted. This device allows for manual control of the erection process.

Additionally, while endovascular therapy for ED is still being explored in clinical studies, it remains a potential option for individuals with arteriogenic ED. Clinical safety and efficacy data suggest promise in this area, though it may not yet be widely available or recommended as a first-line treatment option.²²⁻²⁴

d) Antihypertensive Medications: A Dual-edged Challenge

The use of antihypertensive drugs in the management of hypertension presents a dual challenge, as it is associated with potential side effects,

particularly ED. The relationship between these medications and ED has been extensively investigated due to concerns regarding their impact on both blood pressure control and sexual health. A recent study by Doumas *et al.* delves into the intricate interplay between antihypertensive drugs and ED, emphasizing how these medications may affect treatment adherence and blood pressure management. Several classes of antihypertensive drugs, including diuretics, β -blockers, and centrally acting agents, have been linked to potential negative effects on erectile function. For example, diuretics and nonselective β -blockers have demonstrated associations with ED. The mechanisms underlying the effects of diuretics on erectile function are not entirely clear, while nonselective β -blockers hinder erectile function by blocking β -2 receptors, resulting in increased constriction in penile arteries. Notably, atenolol, a nonselective β -blocker, has been associated with lower testosterone levels in hypertensive men. However, it is important to note that conflicting findings exist, including suggestions that patient awareness of the link between β -blockers and ED could induce anxiety, potentially contributing to ED. In contrast, nebivolol, a third-generation β -blocker with an affinity for β -1 receptors, has shown positive effects on erectile response, potentially due to its ability to stimulate endothelial nitric oxide synthase (eNOS) activity and possess antioxidant properties. Comparing Angiotensin II receptor blockers (ARBs) and ACE inhibitors reveals varied impacts on erectile function. ARBs seem to have beneficial effects, while ACE inhibitors exhibit a neutral influence. This complexity could be related to the direct impact of elevated AngII levels on erectile function and the partial blockade of AngII production by ACE inhibitors. The interaction between antihypertensive medications and ED is of particular interest because ED drugs target the enzyme PDE5 and rely on endogenous nitric oxide (NO) production. While PDE5 inhibitors are generally considered safe for hypertensive patients on antihypertensive medications, these patients often have reduced NO availability, potentially limiting the effectiveness of PDE5 inhibitors. In fact, around 30% of cases show no response to PDE5 inhibitors, and the presence of comorbid conditions like hypertension can further impede drug outcomes. Managing hypertension and ED presents a complex challenge in clinical practice. Physicians must carefully navigate the delicate balance between achieving optimal blood pressure control, ensuring patient compliance with antihypertensive regimens, and preserving the quality of life of sexually active patients. This underscores the need for individualized treatment plans that consider both blood pressure management and sexual health.²⁵⁻²⁸

Conclusion

The intricate relationship between hypertension and ED underscores the importance of understanding the underlying physiological mechanisms that link these two conditions. Both hypertension and ED share common risk factors and pathophysiological pathways, making their association more than coincidental. This connection has led to significant advancements in diagnosis, treatment, and management strategies that aim to improve the quality of life for individuals affected by these conditions. Recent developments in diagnostic techniques, such as pelvic computed tomography angiography (CTA), have expanded our ability to identify the vascular origins of ED more accurately. This non-invasive approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of the iliac-pudendal-penile arterial system, aiding in the selection of appropriate interventions, including

endovascular therapy. This novel approach shows promise in treating arteriogenic ED, with clinical trials demonstrating both safety and efficacy, even in cases refractory to traditional treatments. Lifestyle modifications continue to be a cornerstone of ED management, with evidence suggesting that changes such as smoking cessation, weight loss, regular exercise, and dietary adjustments contribute to improved erectile function and hypertension control. Pharmacotherapy, particularly phosphodiesterase-5 (PDE5) inhibitors, remains a widely accepted treatment option, providing effective relief for many patients. However, the relationship between antihypertensive medications and ED is more complex, as certain classes of drugs have been associated with both positive and negative impacts on erectile function. A nuanced understanding of these interactions is vital for optimizing treatment plans and addressing the specific needs of individual patients. The evolving landscape of ED management reflects the multifaceted nature of this condition and the growing recognition of its impact on overall well-being. By addressing both the physiological and psychological aspects of ED, healthcare providers can offer holistic care that encompasses medical interventions, lifestyle modifications, and patient education. As research continues to uncover new insights into the shared pathways between hypertension and ED, the medical community is better equipped to devise targeted therapies that not only address symptoms but also address the underlying causes. Ultimately, the convergence of medical advancements, technological innovations, and a patient-centered approach holds the promise of improved outcomes for those dealing with the complex interplay between hypertension and ED. Through collaborative efforts between researchers, clinicians, and patients, a comprehensive understanding of these conditions can guide the development of personalized treatment strategies that enhance both cardiovascular health and sexual well-being.

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