

Big Profits in Potency Pills

By Joyce Howard Price

Viagra should reach \$1 billion in sales in its first year, making it the most successful drug launch ever. Legal and ethical issues surrounding the drug should ensure its continued publicity.

Call it the drug that aroused the world. "Since Viagra exploded on the scene, it has gotten everyone's attention, nationally and internationally," says Theresa L. Crenshaw, a San Diego physician and world-renowned sex therapist.

Prescription sales indicate 3 million American men have popped the little blue, diamond-shaped potency pill since it was approved March 27 by the Food and Drug Administration, or FDA. Seventeen other countries have approved the drug developed and sold by Pfizer Inc. "Viagra is the most successful drug ever launched," declares Hemant K. Shah, independent pharmaceutical analyst for HKS & Co., a health-care research firm in Warren, N.J.

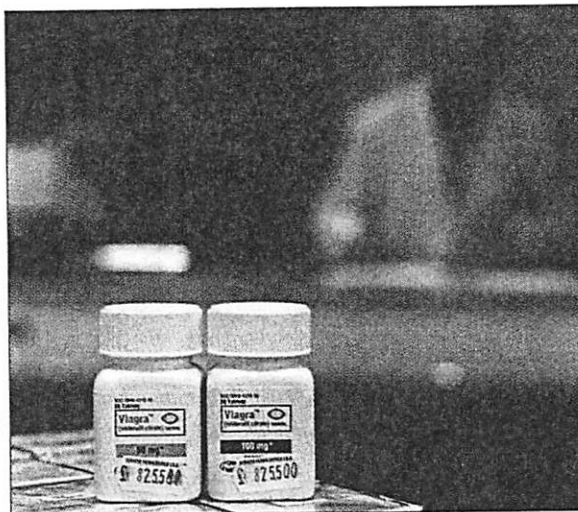
Viagra can be effective in men whose impotence is associated with a broad range of medical conditions, including diabetes, prostate cancer, depression and a variety of vascular and neurogenic disorders. Some customers apparently take it to improve their sex drive, but specialists say Viagra doesn't work that way: There has to be sexual stimulation for Viagra to work.

Demand for the pill has tapered off in recent weeks, reportedly because more insurers are reluctant to pay for what they see as a "recreational" drug. Still, Viagra is on track to reach \$1 billion in sales in its first year, analysts say. Pfizer's stock soared, more than doubling, but since has settled back a bit to a little more than \$104 a share.

Mark A. Immergut, a urologist in Bethesda, Md., has put 250 patients on Viagra — many of them upper-middle class — and he sees no drop-off in interest or prescriptions. "We're getting about an 80 percent success rate," says Immergut, who also is an associate clinical professor of urology at Georgetown University Medical Center. "Our

patients are so happy with it. The side effects for most users are minimal" — headaches reportedly being the most common.

No one should be surprised by the response to the potency pill, says Mariann Caprino, spokeswoman for Pfizer. "Viagra is a breakthrough therapy in an area of medicine where men have been



Capsule gold: Three million Americans have popped Viagra since its approval last spring.

tremendously underdiagnosed," she says. "There are an estimated 30 million impotent men in this country and 100 million worldwide."

Women may be the next targeted consumers. Pfizer and some other researchers are trying to discover whether Viagra will improve sex for women as well as men. "We believe the female genital tract likely will respond to this biochemical pathway," says Arthur Burnett, a urologist at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions heavily involved in Viagra research.

The drug is not without dangers. The FDA has verified that 39 men using Viagra have died, but the agency has no evidence that the pill was the cause. Four men claim Viagra caused them to suffer heart attacks. One is suing Pfizer for \$85 million.

A New Jersey man claims in a lawsuit that he crashed his car because Viagra induced blue-tinged, blurred vision. A Pfizer spokesman says the lawsuit is the first to claim this side effect, although he says that 3 percent of Viagra users have reported vision problems.

Both the FDA and Pfizer note that Viagra users frequently are elderly and have other medical problems. But the drug seems to pose the most serious risk for men who take organic nitrates, such as nitroglycerine. Nitrate-based heart medications relax the smooth muscles in the veins and arteries, decreasing blood pressure. Viagra does the same and, in combination with nitrates, can cause blood pressure to plummet as much as 100 points. Men taking organic nitrates should not use Viagra, says Pfizer.

But Viagra is selling briskly on the black market even in countries where it has not been approved. In Moscow, individual pills are said to have sold for \$120; in Turkey, the price of a bottle of 30 pills reportedly has ranged from \$520 to \$800.

Researchers worldwide are scurrying to develop alternatives to Viagra. In India, where smuggled Viagra sells for \$13 per 50-milligram tablet, a number of pharmaceutical firms are in a rush to copy the drug. The *Wall Street Journal* says one firm expects to sell the Viagra "knock-off" for \$1 or \$2 per pill.

On July 16, Zonagen Inc. of The Woodlands, Texas, announced it had submitted a new drug application to the FDA for Vasomax, another pill that, like Viagra, enhances the blood flow to the penis to make it erect. Unlike Viagra, it does not inter-

fere with nitrate medicines, so it could be a safer option for impotent men with cardiac concerns. If approved, Vasomax would be Viagra's first real drug competition.

Meanwhile, the impotence pill has led to some interesting legal developments. A 61-year-old woman in New York is suing her 70-year-old former live-in companion for \$2 million in "palimony," claiming Viagra destroyed their 10-year relationship.

But most couples don't seem worried about such legal side effects. Jack Kinne, 72, and his wife, Tillie — volunteers at the senior center in the retirement community of Zephyrhills, Fla. — say Viagra remains a hot topic among their set. A sign posted near the center's front door reads: "Next week, we have a bus leaving for Viagra Falls." ●