

NATION

Viagra doesn't work wonders for all men Age, health of users make coveted blue pill ineffective for a third of patients

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Did you hear the one about the 10 million men who took Viagra and nothing happened?

That's no joke.

There are an estimated 30 million American men with what doctors call "erectile dysfunction," but the medical community generally agrees there also are up to a third of that number who can't be helped by Viagra.

Actually, how many have tried Viagra so far isn't known — but it's not nearly everybody who may feel the need. The manufacturer, Pfizer Inc., does know that some 2 million prescriptions have been written, and 85 percent of the prescriptions have gone to men over age 50. Some could be disappointed.

Despite the talk-show hype that

the little blue pill can make you feel 18 years old again, the only males likely to feel that way are those who are 18 years old.

Viagra does work for most, doctors and patients agree, but it doesn't quite achieve for older men what sexy thoughts do for teenagers.

It does not work four or five times a night and it does not, even once, bring equipment to fondly remembered strength — not if you're 75 years old, not if you're 50.

What Viagra does is block an enzyme that can reduce the flow of blood to the penis. Thus, it can

make blood flow more normal.

Even Pfizer, which is promoting its Viagra in multipage color advertisements in medical journals as "the breakthrough oral medication" and saying "success is one simple step away," admits it can't live up to everybody's hopes.

"It doesn't work in about 30 percent of patients," says Pfizer spokeswoman Mariann Caprino. "We don't necessarily know why it doesn't work in a particular patient. There's not necessarily a medical reason [for dysfunction]. It could be psychological in nature. The efficacy rate varies on why

someone has erectile dysfunction. If we take diabetics, Viagra might work in five or six out of 10 cases."

Dr. Robert Wake, a University of Tennessee urologist who was a clinical trial investigator for Pfizer on Viagra, says the pill most commonly does not work on post-surgical cases such as removal of the prostate. The reason (for dysfunction) may not be only blood flow but nerves could be damaged because of the surgery and scarring.

Dr. Wake says the people for whom Viagra works best are hypertensive, or who have depres-

sion or anxiety, performance anxiety and stress. That is, men with no anatomical problems.

"All Viagra does is give normal blood flow," says Dr. Wake. "If the pipes are clogged up, it doesn't matter what you do to increase the flow. It's not going to get better. When you have severe vascular disease, it may not work."

Some critics have worried that too often patients are demanding Viagra and doctors are prescribing the pill without looking to treat serious and possibly life-threatening illnesses for which impotence may be only one symptom.

Dr. Wake, who says he's been writing 30 prescriptions a week, agrees there are men who should not take Viagra even when it might work for them.

"It's important to get the information out that people do need medical workups. If they have coronary artery disease, but they're not on nitrates, and they haven't been having sexual activity ... well, that's fairly strenuous. They need to be careful.

"I've had men in their 70s on oxygen tanks coming in, and they sure want to try Viagra. But if he's the kind of guy who can't walk a half mile without shortness of breath, he probably doesn't need to resume sexual activity."

Pfizer says one of its latest findings is that two-thirds of the men requesting Viagra are newly diagnosed with erectile dysfunction.