

# The Washington Times

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WASHINGTON, D.C., TUESDAY, JUNE 30, 1998 ★

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## Viagra and poppers can be a fatal mix

### Club-scene trend claims three lives

By Laura R. Vanderkam  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The potency pill Viagra has begun to appear on the club party scene, where its interaction with other recreational drugs can be deadly.

Already, three men in their 20s and 30s have died after combining Viagra with "poppers," a type of inhalant stimulant, said Kathy Watt, executive director of the Los Angeles-area Van Ness Recovery House.

"It's a lethal combination," Ms. Watt said. "Anything in our society where word gets out that it will make sex better — people want it."

The problem is emerging in homosexual clubs in the West, where Viagra — which must be prescribed by a doctor — is now available through the black market.

"They have Viagra parties," Ms. Watt said of clubgoers in Los An-

geles. "People will pass out cards with the little blue pill at the top, just like other party drugs."

Pfizer Inc., which manufactures Viagra, issued a statement in May alerting men to the dangers of taking Viagra and inhaling recreational nitrates such as poppers. Package information warns users not to combine Viagra with nitrate heart medicines because of the risk of a precipitous drop — as much as 100 points — in blood pressure.

"It's a serious medication for a serious condition," Pfizer spokeswoman Mariann Caprino said of Viagra. "We certainly recommend that patients see a physician for proper diagnosis and treatment."

The irony is that young, healthy men likely get no effect from Viagra, which aids older men but does not enhance sexual encoun-

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## VIAGRA

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ters.

Both Viagra and poppers work by dilating the blood vessels. According to Pfizer's description of how Viagra works, when a man is sexually aroused, his pelvic nerve cells start releasing nitric oxide, which stimulates the production of a chemical called cGMP. This enzyme widens the blood vessels and produces an erection.

At the same time, another chemical, PDE-5 is being produced, which destroys cGMP. When no more cGMP is produced, PDE-5 takes over and the erection disappears.

Viagra works by inhibiting PDE-5. This boosts the effect of cGMP in men for whom the mechanics otherwise don't work. Poppers — amyl nitrates — also stimulate the production of enzymes that relax the smooth muscles around veins and arteries. This enhances the senses and reportedly makes sexual experiences more intense.

When the two interact, the blood vessels can dilate to fatal levels.

"Poppers" are especially popular with club-going homosexual men who may see Viagra as a kind of aphrodisiac.

According to the Washington Blade and the Whitman-Walker Clinic, there have been no capital-area fatalities or reports of a

## Viagra may be responsible for as many as 30 men's deaths

NEW YORK (Reuters) — The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has received about 30 reports of men dying after taking Viagra, the male potency drug manufactured by Pfizer, the Wall Street Journal reported yesterday.

Citing government reports obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, the Journal said there were close to 100 reports, as of mid-June, of men suffering serious adverse reactions, including death, after taking the Viagra.

Most of the men who died were elderly, with other health problems, the Journal said.

It reported that in addition to the deaths, the reports show seven men had heart attacks, eight had strokes, four blacked out and six had vision problems.

More than 2 million men have used Viagra since it was introduced in April.

The Journal said the reports most likely cover only a fraction of the cases of serious side effects. The government doesn't require reports on serious adverse reactions, and public health experts figure the FDA typically receives reports on only 1 percent to 10 percent of these reactions, the paper said.

Although Pfizer has made it

clear that Viagra should not be taken with nitrate-based medications, the reports raise questions about whether or not other drugs should be taken with Viagra, the newspaper said.

"All high blood pressure medications are suspect," Dr. Raymond Woosley, chairman of Georgetown University's pharmacology department, was quoted as saying.

Dr. Woosley told the Journal that since Viagra can lower blood pressure, mixing it with high blood pressure medications has the potential to cause a dangerous drop in pressure.

especially among those who normally don't dabble in the party scene, is great, she said.

"I've been putting up fliers everywhere," Ms. Watt said, but she conceded that most people won't know about the possibly fatal interaction. The danger of taking Viagra with angina medications made the national talk shows, but few people will announce that they use illegal drugs, either to their doctor or to someone at a nightclub.

"If you're at a party and someone says try this and this, you might be caught off guard," Ms. Watt said of Viagra and poppers.

Pfizer reported that doctors have written nearly 2 million Viagra prescriptions since the drug hit the market this March — 80 percent to men over 50.

Problems arise when men in their 20s, unlikely candidates for impotence problems, also persuade doctors to give them the drug.

"Any doctor finds it easier to write a prescription than to sit down and talk," Ms. Watt said. "If a guy really needs Viagra, he'll have a history with a doctor. I think the guys go in and lie because they think it will make it all better."

The truth is, it doesn't.

Despite the rumors, Viagra will not work as a sex enhancer for men who don't suffer from impotence.

"This drug does not alter libido or desire," Dr. Harrin Padma-Nathan said of Viagra when it first came out. "It does not create prolonged erections. And if you have normal erections, it will not make you feel more rigid."

Viagra was hailed as the beginning of a sexual revolution for older men when the Food and Drug Administration approved the drug this spring. Within a few weeks, doctors were writing 40,000 prescriptions a day nationwide. Many men seeking the drug had suffered from impotence for years because of injuries, prostate surgery or diabetes.

Younger men, however, may have just been caught up in the craze.

"It's a mess," Ms. Watt said of the stories men at the treatment center have told her about Viagra's new presence on the recreational drug scene.

Sixteen deaths among users, not counting the men in Los Angeles, have been reported since Pfizer began testing the drug. Most of these men were in their 60s and 70s and died from heart problems exacerbated by nitrate angina medicines and stress from sexual activity.

"The bottom line is, patients need to talk with their health care provider and read warning labels before taking this," FDA spokeswoman Lorrie McHugh said.