

# Viagramania delivers a punch in a little pill

■ Sales soar as tales of the pill's benefits for men make the rounds.

By Jennifer Harper  
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Welcome to Viagramania.

In the past week, a randy culture has sprung up around the little blue pill with the big wallop.

Viagra is a pep pill, meant to be taken before sexual intercourse as a cure for impotence.

Though it went on the market in late March, the mythology and media attention surrounding it have already reached epic proportions, and hasn't climaxed yet.

Giddy public testimony about that most private of private matters — ironically in a forum that coined the prudish term "Presidential DNA" — is rampant in the press.

Jokes abound on the late-night talk shows. Doctors complain of writer's cramp, and pharmacists, some enjoying the fun, report booming business. Valley Vista

Pharmacy in Kalorama, for example, offers free candles — presumably to illuminate romantic dinners — with a purchase of a Viagra prescription of 10 or more pills.

"Yes, Viagra works! And the craze says a lot about men, women and sex," trumpets a Time magazine cover story.

"This frank discussion of a potency pill can be disconcerting and offensive for some," says Pier Massimo Forni, a Johns Hopkins University history professor who organized an international civility and manners forum at the university in March.

"We are so inured, so accustomed to intimate matters packaged for public consumption by the media. The scope of what's proper has widened considerably."

There are rumblings among women and teen-age boys who want to try Viagra, along with an Internet site ([www.penispill.com](http://www.penispill.com)). Viagra, developed as a medication for high blood pressure, works by

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relaxing, and thus enlarging, blood vessels in the penis.

Just the titillating subject matter is tricky business for Pfizer, the manufacturer, which now has a brochure that counsels employees not to engage in any goofy humor with inquisitive consumers. Look for advertisements of the most tasteful kind in six months.

Already, the drug has triggered

discussions in print, radio and television about feminism, masculine aging, abnormal sexuality, normal sexuality, penis blood flow, America's addiction to pill popping, the insurance industry, the medications industry, the doctor-patient relationship, and, of course, the male-female relationship.

This is not a bad thing, Mr. Forni says, if it informs people on important health matters.

"Thirty years ago, the term 'cancer' wasn't printed because it was considered so awful, so offen-

sive," he says. "That has changed, and for the good. But some of these disclosures, some of the excesses — these can get offensive."

The tell-all mentality has its place, some believe.

"Anything that gets people talking about this problem is a good thing," says Judith Seifer, a West Virginia-based sex therapist and former president of the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists.

"Erectile problems can be a real source of estrangement between couples. If not discussed, this se-

cret just keeps getting nurtured rather than dealt with."

But even at the dawn of the Viagra age, when the drug first surfaced in European clinical trials in 1996, it came with a footnote.

"It will do nothing in the absence of sexual stimulation," cautioned Dr. Ian Osterloh, the trial director at the time.

Mrs. Seifer agrees. "Of course there are unreal expectations about Viagra," she says. "It won't help a loss of libido, for example. This prescription frenzy will pass."

For now, the frenzy is a phenomenon. After only four weeks on the

market, Viagra accounted for 94 percent of all impotence drug sales. Industry analysts say Viagra's annual sales could reach \$1 billion within a few years.

This would put it on par with Premarin, the real uber-pill. This female hormone therapy is the most widely prescribed pill in the world, tops \$1 billion in sales each year and replaces lost estrogen in aging women and preserves their bones, libido, "good" cholesterol and other youthful attributes.

The cost? Premarin pills cost just 40 cents each. Viagra is \$10 a pop.