



Very few men qualify for testosterone therapy, says George Reservitz, MD.

TESTOSTERONE THERAPY NOT A CURE-ALL FOR AGING MEN

Let's face it: No one enjoys getting older. It's only natural to search for ways to restore the vigor of youth.

For men 50 and older, a gradual decline in testosterone levels may contribute to some of the common symptoms of old age. But is this a condition worth treating? Not in most men, according to George Reservitz, MD, medical director of the Barron Center for Men's Health.

"Losing testosterone is just a natural part of the aging process," says Dr. Reservitz. "It's something we rarely need to address through testosterone therapy."

Testosterone 101

Testosterone, the most abundant sex hormone in the male body, is made in large amounts by the testicles and small amounts by the adrenal glands. During puberty, increased testosterone in boys deepens the voice, builds muscle mass, stimulates sperm production and causes the growth of facial and body hair.

Men usually begin to experience waning testosterone levels during their 50s. For most men, the rate of decline is quite slow, and their testosterone never dips below the normal range.

A small percentage of men, however, do have abnormally low testosterone, or "low T." A

frequent culprit is diabetes. According to the American Association of Diabetes Educators, "Men with diabetes are more than twice as likely to have low T compared to other men." Overweight men are similarly susceptible to low T.

Over time, low T may cause symptoms such as these:

- Reduced muscle mass and strength
- Increased body fat
- Weakened bones
- Decreased mental sharpness
- Reduced sex drive
- Erectile dysfunction (ED)
- Depressed mood
- Fatigue

Keep in mind that low T is difficult to diagnose, as its symptoms are subtle and may be attributable to a number of other physical and mental conditions. In addition, many men are too embarrassed to report symptoms such as ED, depression and fatigue.

Treatment carries serious potential risks

For certain men with low T, boosting testosterone to normal levels may alleviate some or all of the above symptoms. However, the health benefits of

testosterone therapy are largely unproven in aging men whose testosterone is waning normally. In addition, the potential risks include sleep apnea, infertility and increased danger of stroke due to excess blood production.

Testosterone therapy may also spur the growth of prostate cancer that already exists in the body. "We don't like prescribing testosterone to older men, as they're much more likely to have prostate cancer to begin with. There's a chance we're only going to make matters worse," says Dr. Reservitz. "Anyone who does take testosterone must come in a few times a year for PSA [prostate-specific antigen] testing and a digital rectal exam. We monitor the situation very closely."

So, who might actually qualify for testosterone therapy? In Dr. Reservitz's mind, only a select few.

"We don't casually give testosterone treatments of any sort. Someone who is younger or middle-aged but generally healthy? We wouldn't

treat anyone like that," says Dr. Reservitz. "But if a patient in his 70s or 80s has no sex drive and is starting to feel like he can't get through the day without extreme fatigue, we'll evaluate his situation. We'll look at things such as family history of diabetes, how well his thyroid is working and what medications he's on. And we'll take a blood sample to see if his testosterone levels are below normal."

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If low T is diagnosed in an older man, testosterone therapy may be an option. But again, the potential benefits must outweigh the serious potential risks. Rarely does this happen, which is

why, says Dr. Reservitz, "We hardly ever prescribe supplemental testosterone to anyone."

The bottom line: As you hit 50 and beyond, the amount of testosterone in your body steadily decreases. For most men, it's nothing you should treat — and no cause for alarm.

GAUGING THE IMPACT OF ANABOLIC STEROIDS ON THE MALE BODY

Thanks in large part to Major League Baseball, anabolic steroids are in the news once again. But professional athletes aren't the only ones dabbling in steroid use — and thus putting their health at risk.

Anabolic steroids are synthetic substances that work like testosterone to help build muscle and strengthen bones. Doctors prescribe these drugs to treat medical conditions such as abnormally low testosterone levels or delayed puberty. However, it is estimated that 3 million Americans are using steroids illegally to improve their appearance or athletic performance.

"The overzealous use of steroids is not limited to hardcore bodybuilders," says Anthony Schena, MD, an orthopedic surgeon at Mount Auburn Hospital. "High school students are doing it, too — even kids who are not playing a sport."

"We underestimate the number of young and middle-aged people who get caught up in this subculture. They obsess over their appearance and want to be the biggest guy around."

How anabolic steroids interact with testosterone

The male body closely regulates testosterone levels. Introducing a testosterone-like substance such as anabolic steroids disrupts the internal environment. In an effort to maintain normal testosterone levels, the body reduces or shuts off its production of natural testosterone. As a result, the steroid user ultimately ends up with less testosterone in his body.

Males who abuse steroids face a variety of potential side effects:

- Acne
- Male-pattern hair loss
- Extreme irritability
- Atherosclerosis (plaque buildup on artery walls)
- Cardiomyopathy (enlarged heart muscle)
- Gynecomastia (breast growth)
- Shrunken testicles
- Reduced sperm count
- Stunted growth (in teens)
- Liver disease (especially with oral steroids)

"Plus, anabolic steroids are a growth trigger," says Dr. Schena. "Could they trigger some cancers? Possibly."

Add it all up, and it's clear that unless you have a prescription from your doctor, you shouldn't be exposing your body to the dangers of steroids.



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