

Bears & Health

Turning 50 - Bears and Viagra

As I approached 50, I had this brain-storm. I'd have a big party and sail into the next half century with the best possible attitude. None of this wimpy weepy stuff about getting old. It was going to be prime time for this bear. And you know what? It worked like a charm. I don't think I ever felt better. 50 was the start of a new age of my life.

What I was less prepared for was turning 51. Which is not to say that it's not still prime time for me. It really is, but there are certain common enough physical accompaniments to ageing that are best faced head on, that aren't going to go away no matter how good your attitude is, one of which is ED - erectile dysfunction. As most of us surmised from those Bob Dole ads on t.v., ED is a condition, like BPH (benign prostatic hypertrophy--enlargement of the prostate) that is more common the older you get, but which is not limited to the elderly. Even now, in fact on prime time news, you see Viagra advertised by race car drivers and firemen. So you don't have to be elderly to benefit from this vasodilator (opener-up of peripheral blood vessels which in the penis means erection), but which has shown a remarkable ability to improve the ED of ageing, and to a lesser extent that resulting from diabetes and other conditions. Anyone having trouble achieving erections may be helped by it and no one of any age should have any qualms about inquiring with their doctors about possible benefits.

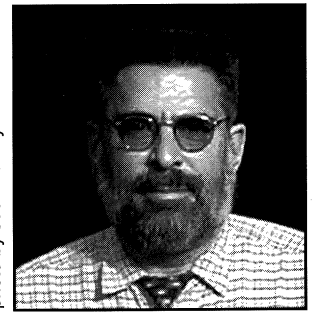
I'm now 55 and my own experience is quite typical. Viagra has in fact had a dramatic impact on my sex life, facilitating insertive sex, making my dick harder for longer. But there are certain things to know about this wonder drug. First, the good news. The safety profile is impressive. The drug may be used even in the presence of heart disease, though anyone with known heart disease should definitely review the situation with his doctor before trying it.

And there are very few interactions with other drugs. Two that are important to know about in our community are inhaled nitrites (poppers) and protease inhibitors, some of which - e.g., Norvir - are P450 enzyme inhibitors and can decrease the metabolism of Viagra. This doesn't mean you can't still use it if you're on Norvir, just that you would start out on a lower dose. Alas, the same is not true of inhaled nitrites, which can interact with Viagra to cause a lethal drop in blood pressure, even with lower doses of each. **SO NEVER USE VIAGRA WITH NITRITES.** The average effective dose is 50 mg and maximum recommended dose is 100mg. Higher dosages can result in toxicity, a common symptom of which is an altered perception of light as bluish. Another symptom of toxicity, rare with ordinary dosages, is priapism, an inability to detumescence (get soft). This might sound great in theory. In reality, it can require emergency intervention. If the situation is not resolvable, the penis can become irreversibly damaged. So do not use greater than the recommended dosages of 50-100 mg max per 24 hour period, and if you find yourself with an erection that does not go away for several hours after sexual activity has ceased, go to an emergency room. Less serious and not uncommon side effects include mild headache, dizziness, fatigue, shortness of breath and vasomotor rhinitis (nasal congestion). For the latter, I use a long-acting over-the-counter nasal decongestant spray at the time of taking the Viagra.

On the surface, it might seem that Viagra could be a contributor to unsafe sex. Better erections mean more fucking, right? But Manhattan gay community internist Dr. Dan William points to the opposite. When some of his patients complained that their condoms kept falling off because their erections weren't strong enough, he has recommended Viagra in the inter-

Lawrence D. Mass, M.D., is a co-founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City and the author/editor of four books, including, most recently, *We Must Love One Another Or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer* (St. Martin's Press). You may address questions or comments to Dr. Mass via our mailing address or Email address.

photo by Joel Bradley



est of facilitating safer sex.

Other pertinent facts. In my own experience Viagra has proven to be exactly as described in the medical literature. It is not an aphrodisiac. It will not create sexual attraction or arousal on its own. It acts only to enhance arousal that is already underway. If you are with someone you are not attracted to or trying to do something that doesn't really turn you on, there will be no effect.

There are some medical causes like advanced diabetes that will not be responsive to Viagra. There are, however, other treatments such as direct injection of the penis with a (cough) cocktail of medications that can create an erection regardless of arousal and that will last in the range of an hour. Such treatments are not without risks (see the movie "Circuit") and should be attempted only as prescribed by a urologist. Viagra is also successfully prescribed for those on antidepressants like prozac and zoloft that can dampen sexual arousal.

Some insurance will cover at least part of its cost, some won't. At about \$10/pill, this is not an insignificant matter for most of us. If you use it 3 times a week year-round, that would come to just under \$2000/year. But beware of online offers, which tend to have small-print membership fees and may be otherwise medically bogus.

If the stunning success of Viagra is any measure, a hard man is still good to find.