

Testosterone Therapy Offers Benefits and Risks

Testosterone replacement has been called “the fountain of youth” for men over 50, and newer methods are currently available to administer the male hormone for a rejuvenating boost.

However, not all men with symptoms such as fatigue and sexual impotence are good candidates for testosterone injections, gels or skin patches, medical experts say. And patients receiving therapy should be monitored closely for possible side effects, doctors say.

A Natural Part of Aging

Testosterone is the male hormone, which is “important in maintaining lean muscle mass, reducing body fat and maintaining strong bones,” says Dr. David G. Edelson, an internist and clinical assistant professor of medicine at Hofstra Northwell School of Medicine. Testosterone “also improves sex drive and often helps with erectile dysfunction,” Edelson says.

Edelson says levels of the male hormone begin to decline naturally beyond age 30.

Although testicular damage can cause a testosterone drop in men under 30, it's men over 50 who most commonly are affected by the symptoms of what is sometimes called “male menopause,” the

doctors say. Symptoms which may indicate abnormally low testosterone levels include fatigue, weight gain that redistributes fat to the abdomen, loss of lean muscle, lack of libido, and difficulty in attaining or maintaining erections.

“Sometimes as a consequence of aging or genetic programming, your body could slow down and stop manufacturing testosterone to the degree that it once did,” says Dr. Deepak A. Kapoor, president of Advanced Urology Centers of New York.

However, Kapoor says, a diagnosis of low testosterone “is definitely not a straightforward discussion. There are a lot of pieces to the puzzle.”

Before prescribing testosterone replacement therapy, other causes, such as pituitary gland tumors, need to be ruled out, Kapoor says. A blood test can help your doctor diagnose low testosterone, he says.

Risks and Benefits

“If you truly have low testosterone, the effects [of replacement therapy] can seem almost miraculous,” Kapoor says.

Testosterone has traditionally been administered as an intramuscular injection given every three weeks, Edelson says. Newer methods include topical gels rubbed



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into the chest and upper arms, and patches applied to the skin.

Edelson says that other methods include “a liquid that can be applied under the armpits like a deodorant ... [and] pellets that can be placed under the skin that absorb slowly and are changed every three-to-six months.” Testosterone capsules that can be swallowed are currently in development, Edelson says.

Therapy should be combined with natural testosterone boosters such as eating a well-

balanced diet, getting enough sleep and doing strength-training exercises to restore lean muscle mass and reduce fat, the doctors say.

The side effects of raising testosterone above safe levels include prostate enlargement and enlarged breast tissue, Edelson says.

Kapoor adds, “When you are going to alter the biodynamics of a delicately-balanced system, you have to monitor the effects very closely so you don't have unintended consequences.”

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