

Forget Viagra! Sound waves can send your sex life into orbit

(Agencies)

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Firing shock-waves into the body could be a radical new way to boost the love lives of men with erection problems. The pain-free therapy boosts performance by stimulating the growth of new blood vessels in the genital area. A small trial involving 20 men who were taking Viagra or similar drugs for impotence problems was so successful that, by the end of the experiment, 15 of them were able to throw their pills away.

None of the volunteers reported any pain or side-effects from the treatment. The radical new therapy, which is on trial in Israel, uses a very mild form of lithotripsy, a technique developed more than 20 years ago for the treatment of kidney stones.

Waves of sound are beamed through the skin, and although they pass harmlessly through body tissue, they are at just the right pressure to smash up kidney stones into tiny sand-like particles that are then passed out of the body in urine. But in recent years, several studies have also shown that this type of shock-wave therapy appears to have a healthy effect on blood vessels. It triggers the release of an important substance called Vascular Endothelial Growth Factor, or VEGF, which sends out a signal for new blood vessels to start growing. As a result, shock-wave therapy has also attracted increasing interest from cardiologists looking for new ways to treat heart disease. U.S. and Japanese researchers are investigating whether firing shock-waves towards the heart will help it sprout healthy new blood vessels.

If so, it could offer a lifeline to patients who are too ill to undergo heart bypass surgery. According to Israeli research, the same benefits could help men who suffer persistent erection problems. Some health experts are now convinced there is a close link between impotence and heart disease, and that problems in the bedroom can often signal hidden blockages in blood vessels near the heart which are reducing blood flow around the body. Doctors at the Rambam Medical Centre in Haifa, Israel, recruited 20 men with an average age of 56 to take part in the trial. All 20 were already on medication and had suffered mild to moderate erection problems for an average of three years.

During the three-week course of treatment, low-intensity shock-waves were repeatedly fired into five specific points in the genital area, using a handheld device. Doctors then assessed the

severity of the men's ailments on a 30-point scale called the International Index of Erectile Dysfunction, widely used to measure impotence problems.

The lower the score, the greater the problem. Before the trial, the men averaged scores of between 12 and 20 points, which meant they had mild to moderate sexual dysfunction. But after treatments, their scores increased by between five and ten points. Experts say anything in excess of five points is a significant improvement. Viagra and similar medications, such as Cialis and Levitra, have transformed the treatment of impotence in the past ten years, around 30 per cent of men who take them see no improvement. For these men, the only other options are to inject drugs straight into the penis, or use a pump that manually increases blood supply to the organ. Dr Yoram Vardi, who led the trial, says: 'Drugs are not a cure. When patients stop taking their medication, then they cannot function. 'With shock-waves, we can do something biological for the problem. These patients can then function without the need for medication.' Dr John Dean, president of the International Society of Sexual Medicine, said the findings were 'intriguing' and worth following up in larger studies. But he warned that earlier attempts to use shock-wave therapy for another condition called Peyronie's disease - where the penis is bent and painful when erect - had failed. 'These findings are interesting and definitely warrant further investigation,' Dr Dean said.

'But we are a long way off saying that men should go to their GP asking for this treatment.'

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