

Peyronie's Disease from a Partner's Perspective

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It's no surprise you haven't heard of Peyronie's disease. Not many sufferers talk about it. Yet it's reported to affect one in every hundred men¹ and that's just the ones who have plucked up the courage to approach their doctors. It's a common cause of erectile dysfunction – and whilst it obviously affects men physically, the disease can also take a huge emotional and psychological toll on their partners. A man is likely to be scared when he first notices an unusual curvature or pain in his erect penis. This article will explain Peyronie's disease; how it might be treated, and how you can support your partner through its various stages.

What is Peyronie's Disease?

Also known as penile curvature, Peyronie's disease is particularly hard to pin down as it has no single cause and varies widely in symptoms. A man who suffers from Peyronie's will have a shortened or bent penis as a result of a plaque, a hard lump of scar tissue. Depending on where the plaque develops in the penis, men may notice a curve that goes up, down or sideways. The penis can also become shorter—sometimes as much as four inches.

Symptoms develop slowly or appear suddenly—almost overnight. They may improve or worsen over time. If the disease is severe, the man's penis is not as flexible as it should be resulting in pain, especially during erection. Often the pain gets better over time, but the curve in the penis will continue to be a problem and make sexual intercourse difficult.

Usually, when intercourse becomes an agonizing struggle, men with Peyronie's disease finally seek medical help. Even after the diagnosis of Peyronie's disease is confirmed, the course for healing can take many directions.

Doctors often first try a "wait and watch" approach since Peyronie's symptoms may improve on their own with no treatment necessary—mostly within the first year. Symptoms may worsen and require surgical repair. Regardless of the form of treatment, the objective is to return the patient to as normal a sex-life as possible i.e. when intercourse is pain-free and enjoyable for both partners.

How Does Peyronie's Particularly Affect Couples?

The first step for the partner of someone suffering from Peyronie's is to recognise the problem. Peyronie's is a difficult disease to hide so your significant other may develop excuses and reasons to avoid intimacy. He might think you won't understand his problem or will laugh and belittle his symptoms. To hide his fears of rejection and insecurity, he avoids intimate contact and appears disinterested in sex. He might get angry and frustrated at the helplessness of the situation, and avoid any attempt to discuss the problem either with you or with a medical professional.

This behaviour is bound to have a knock-on effect on you, as pent-up anger, frustration or low self-esteem puts a strain on the relationship. The irony is that this creates a vicious circle. The stress itself can make the Peyronie's disease worse. Whilst his curvature is the last thing a man wants to talk about, you need to encourage him to openly discuss his problems.

Being in a relationship with a man affected by Peyronie's disease can be frightening, confusing and isolating. Dealing with concerns for your partner and frustration of being unable to change the situation can leave you feeling totally helpless. You may even feel a sense of personal responsibility for the condition since one potential cause is "trauma during intercourse." The inevitable feeling of sadness over the loss of intimacy is also likely to affect your relationship.

It is quite understandable for you both to feel frustrated or helpless when faced with a condition that is so varied in symptoms and treatment. The key point is to realise that help is available and the disease — even if severe — is treatable.

¹ Peyronie's Disease. NIH Publication No. 5, 05-3902, Sept. 2005.

Sorting Out the Problem

In some cases the curvature may improve without treatment. As a result, most doctors prefer to wait up to two years, or longer, before attempting to surgically correct the curvature.¹ In the meantime, before resorting to surgery, there is a host of non-invasive options available that include drugs or mechanical therapies for erectile dysfunction.

Drug therapy is only recommended for patients in the earliest stages of Peyronie's disease – i.e. when the lump is painful or is still forming. Drugs will reduce pain, lump size and the eventual deformity, but they will not cure the problem.

Treatment with shock wave therapy is largely still experimental. Studies in the UK and Germany have shown that once the disease is established and stable, extracorporeal shockwaves directed at Peyronie's plaque can reduce penile deformity. The technique has been used to resolve kidney and gallstones for many years and might avoid the need for surgery. However, it's still under investigation in terms of its suitability for Peyronie's and not yet widely available.²

In a new book, *Understanding Peyronie's Disease*, Dr. Laurence A Levine writes, "Surgery is considered the gold standard of treatment to reduce penile curvature and improve sexual function...The idea of having surgery on the penis may be frightening ...But you should know that the majority of men who have penile surgery are satisfied with the results."³

According to Dr. Levine, the incisions and areas where the plaque is incised during surgery need to be covered with grafts to help keep the blood trapped in the penis to allow erection. Two types of grafts are available: off-the-shelf versions and grafts taken from the patient's own skin.

A new technology called Surgisis® Biodesign™ incorporates the best attributes of grafts taken from the patient's body, without the extra surgery and pain associated with harvesting grafts from the patient. Surgisis Biodesign communicates with the patient's body, signalling surrounding tissue to grow across the scaffold allowing the penis to restore itself. This action supports the healing process by attracting cells and nutrients to the wounded area. Once the healing process is complete, Surgisis Biodesign is undetectable and provides a permanent repair without a permanent material left in the penis.

The Moral of the Story

As Peyronie's can vary so much in symptoms and severity – and as each sufferer can often experience the gamut of both over time – different treatments are relevant at different stages in the disease. But the aim of any treatment remains the same - to make life easier for men with the disease and the partners who love them and want to share intimacy.

Men can live with the disease quite manageably - they might not require treatment and will enjoy a satisfactory sex life with their partner for years. But this could change within weeks. That's why it's so important for the partners of those with Peyronie's to really understand the condition and the treatments available. Often, support for one's partner is the most important part of the journey towards recovery. If you or a loved one has a partner that may be suffering from Peyronie's disease, encourage them to see a consultant or a urologist for a diagnosis and treatment plan. Additional information and resources are available at www.peyroniesassociation.org and www.peyronies.org.

² <http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/menshealth/facts/peyronies.htm>

³ Levine LA. *Understanding Peyronie's Disease*, Omaha, Nebraska: Addicus Books; 2007.