

Health > Wellbeing > Sexual Health

## Men warned of permanent penis damage from injections easily bought via telehealth

A man who was left impotent has shared his harrowing story, as an undercover investigation reveals how alarmingly easy it is for others to make the same mistake.



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Men face permanent damage and invasive surgery from injecting their penises to try and boost sexual performance, amid concerns the powerful drugs are alarmingly easy to obtain over telehealth.

Men face permanent damage and invasive surgery from injecting their penises to try and boost sexual performance, amid concerns the powerful drugs are alarmingly easy to obtain over telehealth.

One man who misused the medication has shared the “catastrophic” results, while an undercover News Corp investigation found a telehealth provider indicated it was willing to provide the injections to a man only in his mid 20s.

The self-administered prescription injections are used as a treatment for erectile dysfunction after oral medication has been unsuccessful, but experts warn they can cause irreversible damage when used inappropriately.

Leading Melbourne urologist Darren Katz said the biggest risk was priapism — a prolonged erection — and patients often didn’t understand this dangerous side effect.



Penile injections can be prescribed for erectile dysfunction if oral medications fail.

Associate Professor Katz said ideally a man would have an erection for around 30 minutes and no more than 60 minutes after injecting, but if it lasted more than four hours they could suffer irreversible damage.

“I’ve seen men who have misused their penile injections in an unsafe manner, and have had permanent penile damage,” Prof Katz said.

“Classically, these men have ordered the drugs online and maybe they didn’t need it in the first place.

“They used the wrong drug or the wrong dose ... or they weren’t instructed on what to do if they get into the situation of this prolonged erection.”

A man who sought help from Prof Katz after misusing penile injections with disastrous results has warned the medications have “significant side effects”.

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The man, who wished to remain anonymous, said he was struggling with mental health issues and using sex as an escape in his early 30s when he accessed the medication.

“The first time I used it I didn’t bother to check the dosage instructions ... several hours later I was in a lot of pain,” he said.

“I knew there was a real problem but for a variety of reasons, including a lot of shame and fear, I did not go to emergency.

“When I finally did go, this situation had become so bad that I needed three separate surgeries to resolve the priapism which then resulted in permanent and total impotence.”

He then turned to Prof Katz for help.

The patient warned these powerful medications needed to be administered carefully and should only be used with medical supervision.

“What seemed like a fun and easy thing to do ended up with pretty catastrophic consequences – for my penis, my general health and definitely also for my mental health,” he said.

“It’s taken several years, lots of therapy and more surgeries including a penile implant to fix things.”

Prof Katz said men looking to “boost” their sexual function may have been misled by pornography.

“Younger men may have unrealistic expectations about what is normal, and therefore they seek treatment for something that just needs education and reassurance,” he said.

Prof Katz said people could obtain erectile dysfunction injections through telehealth providers, with “less than ideal” mechanisms in how patients are prescribed the drugs and managed once they receive the medication.

“In my experience, anyone who wants these types of drugs can get them one way or another,” he said.

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An undercover journalist described his experience seeking injections from a telehealth provider as “disconcerting” and like a sales pitch.

In a phone consult, a “senior patient co-ordinator” who said they screened patients on behalf of doctors, said the clinic was “very good” at restoring men’s health with “oral treatments”.

But after the reporter raised penile injections the co-ordinator told him they were a “last resort” — but still said the company would be “happy” to provide them, and a six week supply would cost about \$800.

“It felt like the representative was reading from a well rehearsed-script,” the journalist, who did not proceed with pursuing a prescription from a telehealth medico, said.

“It was alarming how easy it was to request the injection without more pushback.”

Nurse practitioner and sexologist Melissa Hadley Barrett said the consult sounded “extremely questionable”.

“These are just sales assistants that are doing the first stage assessment ... they’re doing the big hard sell,” she said.

Prof Katz said patients seeking erectile dysfunction treatment required thorough assessment — particularly because the condition could be the “canary in the coalmine” for other health problems.

Ms Hadley Barrett founded Restorative Health Clinic which offers in-person and telehealth consults for erectile dysfunction treatment, but said her practice would only prescribe injections after numerous appointments and a thorough medical work-up.

“Telehealth improves healthcare access and equity ... it is getting a bad name because of unscrupulous providers,” she said.

She said patients had been inappropriately prescribed erectile dysfunction medication by dodgy operators and men had felt trapped by costly subscription deliveries of medication.

A Therapeutic Goods Administration spokesman said erectile dysfunction medicines were one of the authority’s priority focus areas for compliance and enforcement activity.

An Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency spokesman said the regulator was concerned some practitioners — particularly those prescribing via telehealth — may not be conducting a thorough assessment.