Androgens and Sexual Function and Dysfunction in men and women

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The role of androgens in male sexual function and dysfunction in men and women will be compared and contrasted. In the male adult, at least until the age of 50-60, testosterone plays a crucial role in the maintenance of sexual interest and normal arousability, impairment of which, in states of testosterone deficiency, can be readily corrected by testosterone replacement. In the older male, the situation is less predictable, probably due mainly to an age related reduction in androgen receptor sensitivity. The role of androgens in the increase in sexual arousability around male puberty is also less well understood. In the female we have a much less consistent picture, and there is currently much controversy about the possible role of testosterone deficiency in problems of low sexual desire in women. Evidence of three kinds will be briefly reviewed: relations between endogenous androgen levels and sexuality; effects of iatrogenic testosterone suppression; and effects of exogenous testosterone administration. The evidence will be interpreted as showing that women are much more variable than men in their sexual responsiveness to androgens, and hence, some women, but not all, will experience loss of sexual desire when their testosterone levels are low. Furthermore, those who are responsive, respond to levels of testosterone which would be totally ineffective in men. A ‘desensitization hypothesis’ will be presented to account for these striking gender differences.