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**Sexual  
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# Beating the Bedroom Blues

**Natural solutions to enhance sexual function**



by Heather Granato

Nutritional products for sexual health—not an easy market to characterize and, unfortunately, one that has generally been defined by outliers spiking their Internet-only concoctions with pharmaceuticals. However, the topic of sexual dysfunction is a major one, and consumers are increasingly willing to explore natural treatment options. Add in consumers looking for a more natural way to increase libido or enhance their intimate relations, and the potential market explodes.

"The sexual health and sexual dysfunction market is a robust and growing one, given the aging population and concerns about side effects from pharmaceutical products," noted Randi Kindem Sprunk-Jansen, vice president, Sprunk-Jansen. "What was once considered taboo is now socially acceptable."

Addressing sexual health is of major importance, considering its societal prevalence. A study out of the University of Chicago reported 43 percent of women and 31 percent of men experience sexual dysfunction, and also noted social and psychological factors and medical problems influence sexual dysfunction.<sup>1</sup> Further, it is estimated that 22 percent of men have moderate or severe erectile dysfunction (ED), with greater probability linked to increasing age across race and ethnicity.<sup>2</sup>

This has translated to greater sales for natural alternatives. Since 2001, sales of supplements marketed as natural sexual enhancers have risen to \$398 million in 2006, including herbal mixtures, according to estimates by *Nutrition Business Journal*, reported by *The Canadian Press*.<sup>3</sup>

There are several factors driving these sales, noted Rod Tollman, CEO of Life Span Labs. "Aging baby boomers are growing in number and refuse to be defined by their age," he said. "They are more health conscious, have more expendable income, are more often single, and are more interested in maintaining a healthy active sex life much later into life than any previous generation. Also, ED drug marketing has created massive awareness and acceptance of taking a pill to deal with male sexual performance issues. This awareness is ubiquitous in our society and has moved the discussion from the bedroom to the living room. This has been referred to as the second sexual revolution."

Sprunk-Jonsen added while the awareness is growing due to the breadth of marketing for ED drugs, "The overall sexual health market for natural products is growing because there are a number of people who cannot, or choose not to, take pharmaceuticals."

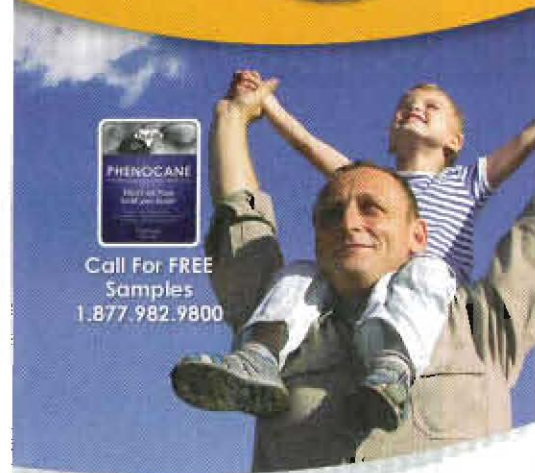
### Differentiating the Category

Within the natural sexual health category, there are generally separate offerings for men and women, many of which feature similar ingredients with added targeted compounds. This is important, added Cheryl Myers, vice president of health sciences, Enzymatic Therapy, as there are differences between the sexes and what they're looking for in this category. "Men are typically more focused on physical performance, while women are typically more focused on mood and psychological factors," he said. "A product that helps a woman to feel more relaxed with the energy or desire for sex is generally what is sought after, as opposed to some physical performance characteristic."

There are several nutritional ingredients that have been studied for their impact on sexual function. Some of these include:

- **Maca** (*Lepidium meyenii*) is a South American tuber, which grows in the high elevations of the Andes. Native Peruvians have used maca root to promote energy and sexual virility. Animal studies suggest maca treatment can increase ejaculation latency and post-ejaculatory interval, through both acute and chronic consumption.<sup>4,5</sup> It may also help treat male infertility linked to lead exposure,<sup>6</sup> and was shown in one small animal study to increase litter size and uterine weight.<sup>7</sup>
- **Tribulus terrestris** has been used in the traditional medicine of China and India, and it contains steroidal saponins that may increase the body's levels of certain hormones. Chinese researchers recently reported administering tribulus extract to animals (7.5 mg/kg) increased levels of testosterone and dihydrotestosterone, suggesting its possible usefulness in mild to moderate cases of ED.<sup>8</sup> In addition, it may enhance release of nitric oxide (NO), which can help address ED.<sup>9</sup>
- **Epimedium**, the botanical name for **horny goat weed**, has been used in Chinese medicine for more than 2,000 years to promote sexual function. The leafy plant contains a variety of flavonoids, polysaccharides, sterols and alkaloids. A recent Russian study reported epimedium could improve ED in aged rats.<sup>10</sup>
- The amino acid **L-arginine** is used to make NO, a compound in the body that helps regulate vascular dilation. By mediating NO-dependent vasodilation, it may help address ED in men with decreased NO production.<sup>11</sup> Studies also suggest providing arginine together with Pycnogenol® (from Natural Health Science) can improve sexual function in men with ED without side effects.<sup>12</sup>
- **Panax (Asian) ginseng**, an adaptogenic herb, was used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) to promote yang energy, improve blood strength and stimulate the body. Studies suggest it may directly impact libido and copulatory performance, inducing vasodilation and modifying NO release.<sup>13</sup> Further, South Korean scientists found 900 mg of Panox ginseng given three times daily to patients with clinical ED significantly improved ED scores.<sup>14</sup>
- **Tongkat ali** (*Eurycoma longifolia*), also known as langjack, is a small evergreen plant that is native to Indonesia and Malaysia, and was traditionally used in Southeast Asia for its antimicrobial and aphrodisiac qualities. More recent research suggests it may increase sexual arousal and performance in aged animals,<sup>15</sup> and has aphrodisiac qualities in younger animals as well.<sup>16</sup>

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Formulators within the natural products industry have sought to combine efficacious nutritional ingredients to develop proprietary products with benefits for men and/or women. For example, Life Span Labs worked with AIBMR, a contract research organization and consulting firm, to develop its product, 112 Degrees. Tallman noted, "112 Degrees is backed by a proprietary science program; extensive safety, purity and efficacy studies were performed before the product was released."

Sprunk-Jansen, meanwhile, tapped into the Greek-Arabic medicinal tradition to develop its products, Feminine™ and Masculine™ tablets. The primary ingredient

in the products is the botanical *asafoetida* (*Ferula assafoetida*), which has been widely used in the Greek-Arabic herbal traditions to treat tiredness and increase libido. Sprunk-Jansen has supported clinical studies on its products. Masculine, which is a concentrated extract of *asafoetida*, improved the libido and erectile function significantly in approximately 80 percent of men (n=85) recruited from fertility clinics who had significantly reduced sperm counts or ED and impotence, according to Kindem Sprunk-Jansen. She added the company's Feminine product combines *asafoetida* with caper buds. "Modern scientific methods indicate that the principal effect of the herbs is to increase blood supply to the genital area while relaxing the muscles," she said. "We carried out a clinical study in 60 women who had problems with their sexual activity or infertility, but were otherwise healthy. After taking one tablet of Feminine per day for only one month, 80 percent of participants noticed an improvement in libido."

The product ArginMox, available in male and female formulations from Daily Wellness Co., has also been studied for its impact on male and female sexual function. The basic ingredients in the formulas include arginine, ginseng and ginkgo. In one trial out of Hawaii, researchers randomized women who reported a lack of sexual desire (n=108) to receive ArginMax for Women or placebo.<sup>17</sup> After one month, there were improvements reported in level of sexual desire and satisfaction with overall sex life, with no estrogen activity. Similar results were reported in an earlier open trial by the same research team.<sup>18</sup> The men's formula has shown similarly positive research results, as men with mild to moderate ED had significant improvements in ability to maintain erection (88 percent of men) and improved satisfaction with their overall sex life (75 percent of men).<sup>19</sup>

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# Complementary Product Sales



In addition to offering dietary supplements to address consumers' needs in the sexual health area, retailers may also have an opportunity to deliver complementary products.

"As people are becoming more interested in using products that are healthful and natural, this preference is being extended to their personal sexual lives," said Susan Montani, vice president of sales, Natural Contours. "They are searching for products that they feel safe using, such as natural massage oils, natural lubricants and intimate products, toys and enhancers that do not contain known toxins, such as phthalates." Natural Contours designs personal massagers that are phthalate-free and made with bacteria-resistant plastic, as well as natural lubricants and oils. The company also developed a Kegel exerciser, which can be used to tone and strengthen the pubococcygeus (PC) muscles. This has

application not only in the sexual health arena, but also for women who have given birth and to prevent urinary incontinence. Similarly, High Island Health developed its product, Pro-State®, a patented prostate massager. "The device is all-natural and works simply with the body's own muscle contractions by emulating a prostate massage to increase blood flow in the lower pelvic region and release congested fluid in the urethra," said Myrenda Chiu, a company exec. "As a result, both prostate health as well as sexual function are addressed. The Pro-State has an 87-percent effectiveness rate and research shows that prostate massage increases the efficacy of many supplements and antibiotics."

Denny Kwock, general manager of Daily Wellness Co., noted the products are designed to be taken on a regular basis to improve the underlying physiology associated with sexual health. "The added benefits are that it also improves physical stamina, overall energy level and the person is always ready for sexual activity," he said. "It does not need to be taken a set length of time before sexual activity, so there is no timing issue."

Daily support was also the basis of formulation for Enzymatic Therapy's offerings, Hot Plants for Him and Hot Plants for Her, which were developed in conjunction with herbal expert Chris Kilhom.

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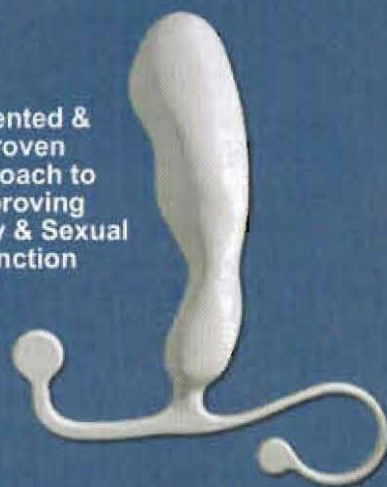
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Myers noted: "These products are not episode-specific; rather, they support those areas of health that play a role in healthy libido: energy, stamina, mood and microcirculation. The product is used daily, so this health support occurs on an ongoing basis. Consequently, there are health benefits from these products that go beyond sexual function."

### Making a Connection

"Breaking through all the clutter in this market is a huge challenge," Tallman said. "Retailers should be very careful about what products they carry in this category. The retailer's default position should be one of distrust until they are confident the company is reputable and the product is backed by science that proves it is safe, pure and effective. And, because of the common practice of spiking these products with ED drugs and the very serious safety issues this creates, retailers should require proof from the company that the products have been tested for purity."

The next step is getting educated about the products as well as the physiology and mechanisms of action. "It's

important that retailers be knowledgeable about sexual health if they want to create the kind of credibility necessary to consistently sell products in this category," Kwock said. "This might mean being able to explain the various reasons why a man or woman is having difficulty and the mechanisms by which a particular product can address those issues."

There is certainly great opportunity for both sales and to help consumers with an aspect of health that impacts general well-being. "I would encourage retailers not to be afraid to promote this category, assuming they have quality and reliable products and partners," Tallman said. "Although this will always be somewhat of a sensitive category requiring tact and care in promoting, it is a huge market and becoming a trusted retail resource for products in the category could be quite profitable." 

For a list of references, e-mail [NPMreferences@vpico.com](mailto:NPMreferences@vpico.com).

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