

## UROLOGY

# Testosterone replacement therapy: risks and precautions

Gentlemen, if you're considering this treatment, do read on to make sure you know what you're in for.



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For men with low testosterone levels, undergoing testosterone replacement therapy (TRT) can have enormous benefits, such as:

- an enhanced sex life
- increased energy levels
- better moods and sleep
- less irritability

In the longer term, TRT can mitigate conditions such as diabetes, obesity, metabolic syndrome and osteoporosis. There are signs that testosterone could extend the length of one's life if one's testosterone level is low, as surveys have shown a link between a low testosterone level and lower life expectancy.

TRT can take the form of three monthly injections or daily skin application of a gel containing the hormone. Treatment lasts three to six months and, in most cases, may be longer.

### Risks

Although most medical practitioners say the benefits outweigh the risks, gentlemen considering TRT should still understand what they are.

Men undergoing TRT are at risk of blood clots if not monitored regularly, as the production of red blood cells is also increased. One way to reduce this is for people to donate blood once in a while. Other risks include sleep apnoea, ankle swelling, acne and, rarely, breast enlargement — all of which should disappear when treatment ends. Fertility is also reduced, hence it is contraindicated if one is planning for a child. Fertility can return once treatment is stopped.

Then there is prostate cancer. There is not much proof collected over the past decades to show links between TRT and the development of this form of cancer, but if you have prostate cancer — even before symptoms develop — it will grow very quickly as it feeds on testosterone. So it is imperative that all

patients going on TRT be screened thoroughly for a prostate cancer before treatment begins. It is also recommended that such patients go for a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test at least two times a year. This test measures a chemical secreted by the prostate gland. A high level (more than 4ng/ml) of that substance could mean one of three conditions:

- an enlarged prostate
- inflammation of the prostate (prostatitis)
- prostate cancer

Patients should also be screened for male breast cancer, but current evidence does not show a definite link with heart disease.

### Precautions

These precautions apply to patients who opt for the gel treatment:

- They must ensure that their medication is stored where no child can accidentally come into contact with it.
- They must wash their hands after applying the gel.
- Wherever they have applied the gel, they must avoid having that part come into contact with women, children or pets for two to four hours.

If these points are not adhered to, side effects such as hair growth and early puberty could result in the women and children who come into contact with the gel.

TRT has improved the quality of life in many men with the so-called “mid-life crisis” due to low testosterone levels. It is generally safe, but risk-versus-benefit issues need to be discussed with patients first, and all patients need to be monitored regularly. It must also be remembered that TRT is replacement therapy for those suffering from late-onset hypogonadism and is neither a panacea for performance enhancement nor bodybuilding. 