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Low Testosterone: How Do You Know When Levels Are Too Low?

(continued)

Low Testosterone: How Low Is Too Low?

The bottom of a man's normal total testosterone range is about 300 nanograms per deciliter (ng/dL). The upper limits are 1,000 to 1,200 ng/dL. A lower-than-normal score on a blood test can be caused by a number of conditions, including:

- Injury to the testicles
- Testicular cancer or treatment for testicular cancer
- Hormonal disorders
- Infection
- HIV/AIDS
- Chronic liver or kidney disease
- Type 2 diabetes
- Obesity

Some medicines and genetic conditions can also lower a man's testosterone score. Aging does contribute to low scores. In some cases, the cause is unknown.

A low score does not always translate to symptoms, Mezitis says, "but we often find something that's off when we see scores of 200 or 100 ng/dL."

Hedges agrees and warns that even if a man does not have symptoms, he may be well advised to seek treatment. Low testosterone scores often lead to drops in bone density, meaning that bones become more fragile and increasingly prone to breaks.

"That's something I would want to have a conversation about," Hedges says. "Bone density issues are not always apparent."

Low Testosterone Treatment

Having a gradual decline in your testosterone level as you age is to be expected. Treatment is sometimes considered if you're experiencing symptoms related to low testosterone.

If a young man's low testosterone is a problem for a couple trying to get [pregnant](#), Mezitis and Hedges say testosterone injections are the best option. Given every few weeks, the injections stimulate sperm production and motility ("swimming ability"). When [fertility](#) is not an issue, the ideal testosterone delivery method is a daily gel or patch. Because they are applied on a regular and frequent basis, these treatments keep a man's testosterone at a steady level and keep his symptoms at bay. If you are using testosterone gel on your skin, be careful not to expose other people to the gel.

Hedges also describes implantable testosterone pellets, a relatively new form of treatment in which several pellets are placed under the skin of the buttocks, where they release testosterone over the course of about three to four months.

What Are the Risks and Benefits of Testosterone Treatment?

"If their symptoms are truly due to low testosterone, patients tell me that within a few weeks they notice a significant difference, though sometimes it is not too dramatic," Hedges says. "Sex is better, depression is better -- you can see it directly and quickly."

There are also risks. Testosterone treatment can raise a man's red blood cell count as well as enlarge his breasts. It can also accelerate [prostate](#) growth. Men with [breast cancer](#) should not receive testosterone treatment.

Testosterone treatment usually is not advised for men with [prostate cancer](#). Hedges says some of the associations between [testosterone replacement therapy](#) and prostate health are currently being challenged. In his practice, he does offer testosterone

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treatment to men who have been treated for prostate cancer.

"The take-home [message] is treatment is safe as long as you get careful monitoring," Hedges says. "If there are known issues, patients should be treated by a specialist."

Further Reading:

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[Erectile Dysfunction and Testosterone Replacement Therapy](#)
[Low Testosterone and Your Health](#)
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SOURCES:

Spyros Mezitis, MD, PhD, endocrinologist, Lenox Hill Hospital, New York.
Jason Hedges, MD, PhD, urologist, Oregon Health and Science University, Portland, Ore.
The Hormone Foundation: "Low Testosterone and Men's Health."
The Hormone Foundation: "Patient Guide to Androgen Deficiency Syndromes in Adult Men."
Patient Education Institute: "Low Testosterone Reference Summary."
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