

When Old Faithful Flags

What women
can do about
impotence

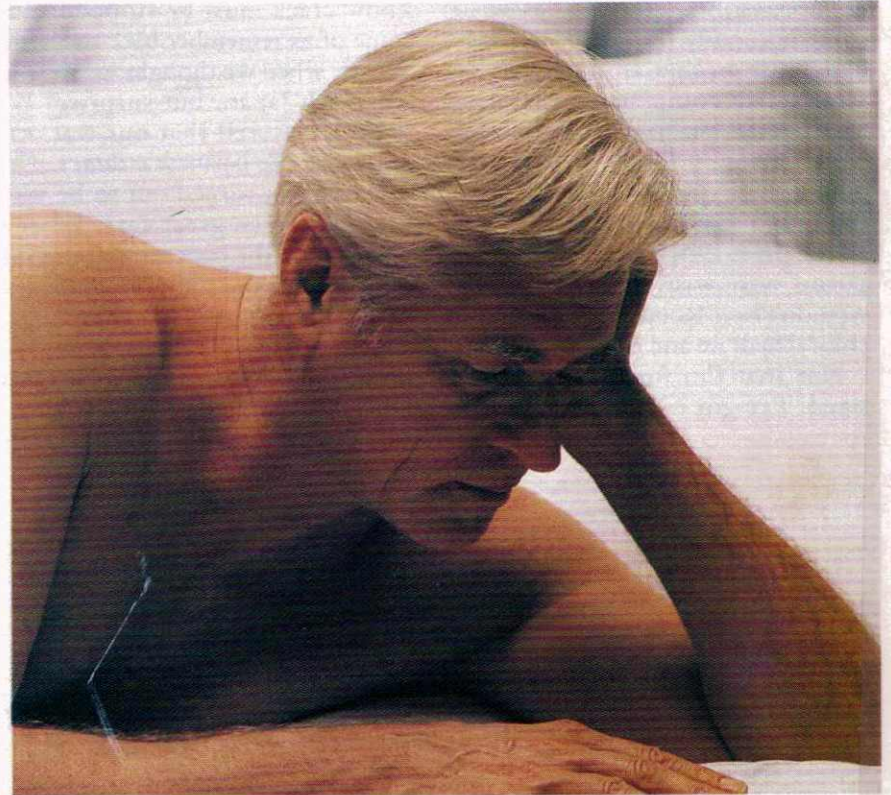
BY LARRY WICHMAN

YOU SLIP INTO YOUR most seductive silk nightgown and fall into your lover's arms. Yet for the second night in a month he mysteriously fails to rise to the occasion, and you find yourself lying awake, certain that your man has a mistress, certain that he hates you, and certain that this never would have happened if you'd lost the five pounds you gained at Christmas!

It's only natural to feel pangs of self-doubt at your lover's inability to become physically aroused. You wouldn't be human if you didn't. But it's likely that your partner's problem has nothing to do with you. For that matter, he may not even have a problem at all.

Every man experiences occasional impotence. He may have had too much to drink or too much on his mind. He may have been dog tired. If he was on a date, he may have been nervous about being in bed with a new partner he was trying like crazy to impress.

"The mind plays an important role in sex," explains Cindy Meredith, R.N., co-founder of the Recovery of Male Potency (ROMP) program in Southfield, Michigan. "If your lover is preoccupied with office politics or money problems, it's just not going to happen. The mind says, 'Look, sex



is not a priority right now' and overrides the body's ability to respond."

What's more, a man's sexual response changes as he reaches middle age—a natural state of things that women often misinterpret as an early sign of dysfunction. It takes an older man longer to get an erection. He may require assistance from you to achieve one, and even then it may come and go as your lovemaking progresses. But that certainly doesn't mean he's impotent.

"While older men are more likely to have physical contributors, they're no more vulnerable to psychologically induced impotence than younger men," says Linda De Villers, Ph.D., a West Los Angeles psycholo-

gist specializing in sexual relationships. "Plus, the older man who's experienced one or two episodes of impotence has more confidence than the young man who's experiencing it for the first time. He's able to handle it more adeptly."

But that first failure can have a devastating effect on any male, regardless of his age. If, in fact, your lover has reached 40-plus years without experiencing an evening's impotence, his ego may be sorely tested. There's no telling how he'll react. He may even fear that his sex life is over—that once a lusty lothario, he's now on the verge of becoming an old, impotent shell of his former self.

The danger in such a case is that

he'll begin to confuse his paranoia with reality, and as the condition feeds upon itself the failures will occur again and again. "Men get into a Catch-22 situation in which the mind says, 'You failed once. What makes you think you're not going to fail again?'" says Meredith. "It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."

According to De Villers, a woman's reaction is dictated by her interpretation of the event and her level of self-confidence. If she's self-assured and aware that most men have this problem from time to time, she's unlikely to feel threatened. Conversely, a less secure woman is apt to take her lover's failure as a sign of rejection. She may get angry. She may feel guilty or frightened. She may even begin to question her sexual desirability.

Remembering that nothing breeds success like success, get your man right back into bed the next evening and fire up his passion.

"Ironically," De Villers adds, "the bigger the fuss she makes, the more likely she is to compound the problem, possibly turning a sporadic condition into a chronic one."

As the problem escalates, the question of who initiates sex becomes critical as well. Under normal circumstances, a man might be delighted to have his lover seduce him. But if he's having problems achieving an erection, her overtures could be perceived as threatening. "I hear it quite often," De Villers explains. "Women will say, 'I don't know what to do anymore. We both used to initiate sex, but now I'm afraid to. I just wait to see what he's going to do. I don't dare make the first move. I tried that last week, and he rejected me.'"

Sex becomes such a frustrating proposition that couples abstain for weeks or months at a time. If they've been together for a long time, they might go years without physical intimacy. De Villers cites one case in which a sexually frustrated woman

didn't even know her husband was having potency problems. The man had been too ashamed to admit it. Instead, he'd avoided making love to her for 18 months. It wasn't until she filed for divorce that he finally sought treatment.

With emotions running high and with so much at stake, what *does* a woman say when her lover is unable to perform? Psychologists say that men respond best if you don't make a big deal out of it. So if it doesn't seem to bother him, you might want to ignore it the first few times it happens. It's alright to acknowledge what's happening, of course, but tread lightly.

"You have to read the situation and play it by ear," De Villers advises. "If he's brooding, you need to say something like, 'You're really exaggerating this. It's alright. Let's just relax.' Be reassuring. Normalize the event. Remind him that maybe he's been working too hard or has had too much to drink."

If your lover responds by shrugging off the episode or making a joke, it's a good indication that his erectile failure is nothing more than an isolated incident. But you don't want to take any chances. So remembering that nothing breeds success like success, get him right back into bed the next evening and fire up his passion with a slow, enticing seduction.

"Be creative. Be sensual. Pamper him," De Villers suggests. "You might want to bring a feather duster or a boa into bed and tease him with it—teasing is *very* effective. It's a great way to build up his confidence if he failed the night before." As an alternative, she suggests telling each other your sexual fantasies. Maybe even act one out. "You can't be absorbed in a fantasy and have performance anxiety," she explains. "The two are mutually exclusive."

However, if impotence does become an ongoing occurrence, by all means get your lover to talk about it. Suggest that he see a urologist who specializes in erectile dysfunction. His failure may be due to something as easily remedied as excessive use of tobacco or alcohol. A prescription drug might be to blame. On the other hand, chronic impotence is of-

ten symptomatic of such serious illnesses as adult-onset diabetes, arteriosclerosis, kidney disease, or cancer of the prostate. Or he may have a psychological problem that calls for sex therapy. So make sure his condition is diagnosed as soon as possible.

Just remember that when you do discuss these sensitive matters, wait until morning. You don't want to turn the bedroom into an arena for confrontation. Your bed will probably be threatening enough to your lover already! **M**

Freelance writer Larry Wichman is a frequent contributor to men's magazines, including Men's Fitness.

Where to Turn

IF YOU WISH TO OBTAIN additional information on impotence or a list of self-help groups in your area, the following organizations will be happy to assist you. Many have local chapters around the country that provide programs for impotent men as well as their partners. Inquiries will be treated discreetly.

American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists
435 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1717
Chicago, IL 60611
(312) 644-0828

Impotents Anonymous
(I.A. & I-ANON)
P.O. Box 1257
Maryville, TN 37802
(615) 983-6064

ROMP (Recovery of Male Potency)
27211 Lahser, Suite 208
Southfield, MI 48034
1 (800) TEL-ROMP;
in Michigan: (313) 357-1216

Potency Restored
8630 Fenton St., Suite 218
Silver Springs, MD 20910
(301) 588-5777

Public Information Bureau
(Information Center Hotline)
1 (800) 221-5517