

Your Health

Testosterone Down, Death Risk Up

Steven Reinberg, HealthDay News 08.17.06, 12:00 AM ET

Low testosterone may boost the risk of death in men over 40, a new study has found.

A U.S. team found that older men with relatively low testosterone had an 88% increased risk of death compared with men with normal testosterone levels. But they don't yet know why.

"This is really an unusual finding. The exact mechanism of this needs to be worked out," said lead researcher Dr. **Molly M. Shores** of the Veterans Administration Puget Sound Health Care System and University of Washington, Seattle.

The report was published in the Aug. 14/28 issue of the *Archives of Internal Medicine*.

As men age, their testosterone levels gradually decline. After age 30, levels decrease by about 1.5% per year. Low testosterone levels can result in decreased muscle mass and bone density, insulin resistance and low sex drive, as well as less energy, more irritability and feelings of depression, the researchers noted.

In the study, Shores and her colleagues studied 858 men over 40 to see whether low testosterone levels were associated with an increased risk of death.

Among these men, 19% had low testosterone levels, 28% had an equivocal testosterone level (meaning that their tests revealed an equal number of low and normal levels) and 53% had normal levels.

"Low testosterone in older men was associated with an increased risk for mortality," Shores concluded. During 4.3 years of follow-up, 20.1% of men with normal testosterone levels died, compared with 24.6% of men with equivocal levels and 34.9% of men with low testosterone levels, Shores' team found.

Testosterone levels can be affected by illness, surgery and other medical problems. But even when the researchers excluded men who had died within the first year of follow-up, those with low testosterone levels were still 68% more likely to die compare to men with normal levels of the hormone, Shores noted.

It's not yet clear whether low testosterone helps cause illness and death, Shores said. Men who have chronic illnesses typically have low testosterone levels, she noted, so "it may be that men who are ill have a low testosterone level, and then they have a higher death rate."

Shores suggested that men who think they might have low testosterone levels discuss it with their doctor. Testosterone supplementation is an option, but Shores cautioned against it, saying the risks and benefits of such treatment aren't yet known.

One expert said the findings aren't overly surprising.

"This confirms similar data from the Massachusetts Male Aging Study," said Dr. **Andre T. Guay**, the director of the Center for Sexual Function/Endocrinology at the Lahey Clinic in Peabody, Mass.

But the threshold Shores used to define low testosterone is lower than what other researchers typically use, "so people with really low testosterone levels are at risk," he added.