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Low testosterone under-diagnosed, easy to treat

By PAM MELLISKOG (Longmont) Daily Times-Call

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HYGIENE, Colo.—The gel-form testosterone Basil Irwin uses to help him feel vibrant and healthy again arrives in the mail every 90 days with an orange warning sticker that reads: "Controlled substance, dangerous unless used as directed."

Because this signature male hormone develops muscle and fuels sex drive, bodybuilders and others have abused it and jeopardized their health—one reason doctors must write 6-month prescriptions versus the standard 12 months.

However, for the estimated 13 million men suffering from low testosterone in the United States, legitimate testosterone replacement therapy represents an elixir for those diagnosed and treated.

Therapy benefits include reduced fatigue, depression and anger; a rekindled interest in sex and more frequent erections; and increased muscle mass and bone density.

Yet, only 5 percent to 10 percent of those considered eligible for HRT receive it.

Irwin, 57, said that unraveling his tangled health issues, which include pernicious anemia and hypothyroidism, delayed the low testosterone diagnosis he got three months ago.

HRT boosted his total testosterone blood levels from a low normal score of 378 nanograms per deciliter to 719 ng/dL by late last month. The range for men runs from 300 to 1,000 ng/dL, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Within one week of starting HRT, he felt positive treatment results.

"I felt a little more powerful, less draggy," he said.

He gardened three prize tomato varieties all summer and traveled to California recently to hike in the Redwood Forest.

Did his sex drive pick up?

"That, too," Irwin said.

Men undergoing this therapy may not as quickly appreciate the longer-term health improvements related to maintaining healthy testosterone levels.

For instance, an estimated one-third of men with type 2 diabetes may also experience low testosterone levels, according to a research paper published by the State University of New York at Buffalo in 2004.

If that condition goes undiagnosed, men may suffer worse health consequences given testosterone's influence on lowering body fat and enhancing how the body processes insulin, a hormone that regulates blood sugar.

Studies presented this year at The Endocrine Society's 91st Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., also show that long-term testosterone replacement therapy in middle-aged and older men with low testosterone levels reduces risk factors related to cardiovascular disease and nonalcoholic fatty liver disease.

Treatment begins after a simple blood test diagnosis, something Longmont Clinic endocrinologist Dr. David Podlecki uses often when men complain of fatigue.

The condition can stem from injury or disease in the testes, which produce testosterone. But malfunctioning hypothalamus and pituitary glands, which regulate testosterone production in the testes, also may impact

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blood levels, he said. Some pain medications such as morphine or anabolic steroids squelch testosterone production, too.

Most often, though, advancing age is the culprit.

Testosterone production peaks in a man's body at about age 17, plateaus and then begins declining at an average rate of 1 percent to 2 percent per year beginning in the 30s and 40s. About half of all octogenarians could be diagnosed with low testosterone levels, according to the American Academy of Family Physicians.

These days, prescription testosterone gel therapy has almost completely replaced testosterone injections, patches and pills, according to the Food and Drug Administration.

Irwin follows his doctor's orders by rubbing a 5-ounce packet of the clear, nongreasy, fast-drying gel on his upper arms every morning.

Though the diagnosis and treatment that can make such a difference in men's health remains low, the FDA reports increases in gel production every year since 2001.

Sales figures reflect the same story.

HRT prescription sales in the United States hit \$400 million in 2004, according to the New England Journal of Medicine. The industry's market last year expanded to \$900 million.

"I feel like I'm coming back to life," Irwin said.

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