

Vardenafil (Levitra)

Vardenafil (Levitra) is a treatment for erectile dysfunction. Its effects tend to last around 6 hours and can be taken a few hours before intercourse on an as-needed basis (but do not take more than 2 doses/day unless directed to do so). Blood levels tend to peak ½-2 hours after taking it. Despite the stereotype that these medications are for men, they are well-researched in women, and improved sex drive in women with sexual side effects to antidepressants. These “PDE5 inhibitors” affect the clitoris as well as the penis, and enhance dopamine signaling in parts of the brain that are involved in sexual desire.

Mechanism

Inhibits the enzyme phosphodiesterase type 5 (PDE5), enhancing the effects of nitric oxide in initiating and maintaining erection by keeping muscles of the corpus cavernosum relaxed, thereby increasing blood flow into the penis.

Dosing

Absorption of the drug may be decreased 50% if taken with a high fat meal. Supplied as 2.5 mg, 5 mg, 10 mg, and 20 mg orange tablets (breakable).

Side Effects

Headache, stomach distress, nasal congestion, flushing. Priapism (sustained, uncomfortable erection) is very rare. To help side effects, you can use Tylenol for headache, Sudafed for nasal congestion, and Pepto-bismol for GI distress unless you have a medical condition that would prohibit these.

Heart issues: This medication is considered safe for people with controlled hypertension; mild, stable angina (=chest pain); history of heart attack; mild heart-valve disorders. It should not be taken by people with more severe heart disease.

Interactions

Should never be taken with nitrate drugs or it can cause dangerous blood pressure drops (e.g. sublingual nitroglycerin and Isordil (isosorbide)). It can be safely combined with any non-nitrate blood pressure medicine. Use with caution in combination with alpha-blockers, such as doxazosin (used for benign prostatic hypertrophy).

Some medications can increase its blood levels, such as cimetidine and erythromycin. Vardenafil does not affect blood levels of other drugs.

Cost and Insurance

Vardenafil is available generic but may not be covered by insurance. If paying out-of-pocket, find the lowest cost price at local stores through GoodRx.com, or through online pharmacies at HoneyBeeHealth.com, GeniusRx.com, or CostPlusDrugs.com.

–Updated 6/25/2025 by Chris Aiken, MD