

A Qualitative Analysis of Internet Forum Discussions on Hard Flaccid Syndrome

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Introduction: Hard flaccid (HF) syndrome is a symptom complex that significantly impacts a man's sexual and social life; however, HF syndrome is not formally recognized as a real medical condition, with only one published case series currently available.

Objective: To conduct a qualitative, internet forum analysis of HF reports.

Methods: "Hard flaccid; forum" was searched in Google; 12 forum discussions and 6150 comments from September to November 2018 were thematically analyzed. Results were independently reviewed by two researchers and transcribed for details regarding etiology, diagnosis, symptoms, and/or management. Inter-rater reliability and validity were assessed and a conceptual framework was created.

Results: Discussion threads were most often initiated by a man seeking information on and advice regarding HF or symptoms related to HF. The thread with the most responses had 3926 replies among 393 pages. Overall, men initiating discussion threads appeared to have several unanswered questions regarding symptoms suggestive of HF. Four themes arose: "I would like to ensure that I have HF", "How did I end up like this?", "Seeking support for treatment choices – who will help me?", and "How can I cope with this condition?". Thematic analysis revealed that most HF cases began after a traumatic event, with the most commonly associated symptoms being semi-hardness in the flaccid state, penile sensory changes, erectile dysfunction, and emotional distress.

Considering the histories and complaints of HF patients, we hypothesize that this clinical phenomenon may result from injury to the pudendal nerve along with pudendal artery during a traumatic event. This further leads to sexual and urinary symptoms, followed by emotional distress, which may cause pelvic floor spasms and further exacerbates HF-related symptoms (Figure 1).

Conclusions: Although HF is not recognized by major medical authorities, many men appear to suffer from symptoms related to HF syndrome. Future basic science and clinical studies must be conducted to understand the exact pathophysiology of HF syndrome and to develop effective therapies.

Figure 1. Vicious cycle of HF syndrome

