

## Bamboozled by reflex boners <sup>[1]</sup>

(1) Dear Alice,

Should a normal man's penis become erect for a certain number of times throughout one day (without any external stimulus)? Or, do these erections occur only while a man is sleeping? I have been masturbating once every day or every other day, and I have noticed that I rarely get any of those spontaneous erections during the day at all. Plus, I have been waking up with no morning erection during the past week. Have I been masturbating too much?

— Worried

(2) Dear Alice,

I am a virgin and I was wondering if it is common for a virgin male to get hard-ons throughout the day for no apparent sexual reason? It usually happens to me about three to four times daily... am I alone?

Thank you very much,

Curious person

### **Answer**

Dear Worried and Curious person,

You might be looking for some hard and fast stats on hard-ons, but the truth is that every penis marches to the beat of its own erectile drum. The general estimate is that the average man — virgins and non-virgins alike — will get about eleven erections per day, but this number can vary **widely** depending on your age, health factors, and what your body feels like doing on a given day. Erections are more complex than they seem! Lots of different parts of your body (your brain, muscles, nerves, hormones, and more) have to all come together in order to raise that flag of yours, whether you're sexually stimulated or not. So, to respond to the both of you, there's usually no reason to be alarmed if you're getting slightly more or slightly fewer erections than usual and masturbation will not impact the number of erections you get each day.

What causes a surprise stiffy? Reflex erections — or erections that happen due to non-sexual stimuli

[2] — can occur when you experience any strong emotion, like anger, stress, or fear. You can also get an uninvited boner if something makes you think about sex or turns you on, whether it's the sight of your crush or that sandwich you just had for lunch (hey, the body's a mysterious place!). Another common experience is nocturnal penile tumescence, or the fancy scientific term for morning wood [3]. Over the course of the night, you can get three to five of these spontaneous erections. Although it's not totally understood, some scientists think it could be your body's regular "tune up" of all the parts down south to keep them in working order. Lastly, plain old fluctuations in hormones may lead to random erections, and young men — especially teenagers — are chock-full of testosterone that's just waiting for the chance to send out a woodie at an inopportune moment. For ideas on how to conceal these sneak attacks from down under, check out Erection detection [4].

While some experience many erections daily, others may be feeling —well —deflated. Worried, you say you're wondering specifically whether your frequent masturbation could be the explanation for your tamer-than-usual penis. Fortunately for you, there are no known downsides to getting your jollies through masturbation, and it's actually thought to be a healthy behavior [5]. As long as you're not making your genitals raw or sore, using masturbation as an "escape" from your emotions, or damaging your relationship with a partner because of your frequent masturbation, then feel free to proceed full steam *a-head* (pun intended). Everyone experiences a different number of erections daily. One explanation for your experience is that men simply get fewer and fewer uninvited hard-ons as they get older and their hormones begin to settle. Whereas teen males may find themselves flying their flag at even the gentlest breeze, these random erections often become less frequent over time. It's also not uncommon for feelings of fear, doubt, insecurity, and stress to interfere with your ability to get 'er up and running.

Whether your spontaneous erection frequency seems to be waxing (Curious person) or waning (Worried), checking in with a health care provider is an option you might consider if you're concerned that there could be something more serious going on:

- Possible medical causes of **fewer-than-normal erections** include high blood pressure, diabetes, depression, multiple sclerosis, nerve damage, spinal cord injuries, or low testosterone. Some antidepressants, beta blockers, sleeping pills, or peptic ulcer medications can also hamper hard-ons. Too much alcohol, tobacco, or cocaine are also possible culprits. If you're finding that you can't "get it up" more than 25 percent of the time when you're actually trying to, erectile dysfunction [6] could also be an explanation.
- Possible medical causes of **frequent spontaneous erections** include an enlarged prostate, needing to pee, and some recreational drugs. If you ever end up with a painful erection that lasts for hours or days, it's possible that you're experiencing something called priapism [7], when blood can't get out of your penis. If this happens, consulting with a health care provider is highly recommended to avoid any long term damage to your prized possession.

Although it would be nice to be able to control precisely when erections happen, the reality is that penises tend to do their own thing wherever and whenever they want — whether that means far more or far fewer erections than expected. Over time, though, you'll likely learn what's normal and what's not for your body.

Alice!

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Premature ejaculation [12]

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