

Sex, Intimacy and Older Adults

Welcome to the **Pathway to Health** newsletter published regularly by Bayshore HealthCare to support families and informal caregivers in caring for your loved ones. Each edition features a new theme related to health and well-being, and also provides information, resources and suggestions to help you manage health issues.

Contrary to popular belief, sex doesn't simply end at a certain age. Plenty of older adults enjoy physical intimacy – but social taboos often prevent people from acknowledging and talking about it.

Even worse, ageist attitudes may deter seniors from discussing their sexuality and sexual health with their romantic partner or health-care providers.

How many older adults are sexually active? In 2018, the University of Michigan polled 1,002 people aged 65 to 80 about sex and relationships. Forty per cent of respondents said they were sexually active, including 46% of people aged 65 to 70, 39% of those aged 71 to 75, and 25% of those aged 76 to 80. About half of the male respondents were sexually active, and about one-third of the females. Just over half of all respondents agreed with the statement “Sex is important to my overall quality of life,” and three-quarters agreed that sex is an important part of a romantic relationship at any age.

Not only are a lot of older adults having sex, but they're having it often: an American study conducted in 2011 found that sexually active people aged 75 to 85 were having sex two or three times a month, and nearly a quarter of them were having sex at least once a week. A recent German study found that a third of seniors aged 60 to 82 were having sexual relations more often than younger adults, aged 22 to 36.

Other studies of seniors and sexual activity have yielded a range of results, in part because the definition of “sexual activity” varies – some ask only about sexual intercourse, while others also include kissing, petting and fondling. But what they all confirm is that a significant number of older adults still enjoy physical intimacy. Yet, too often, seniors are presumed to be uninterested in sex, or they are judged negatively for expressing an interest.

The happiness connection

Here's why it's important to erase the stigma and talk more openly about seniors' sexuality: sexual activity in later life is linked to both happiness and well-being.

A study published in the journal *Sexual Medicine* in March 2019 offered several insights into the sex lives of seniors. Researchers surveyed thousands of men and women aged 50 and older, and here's what they found:

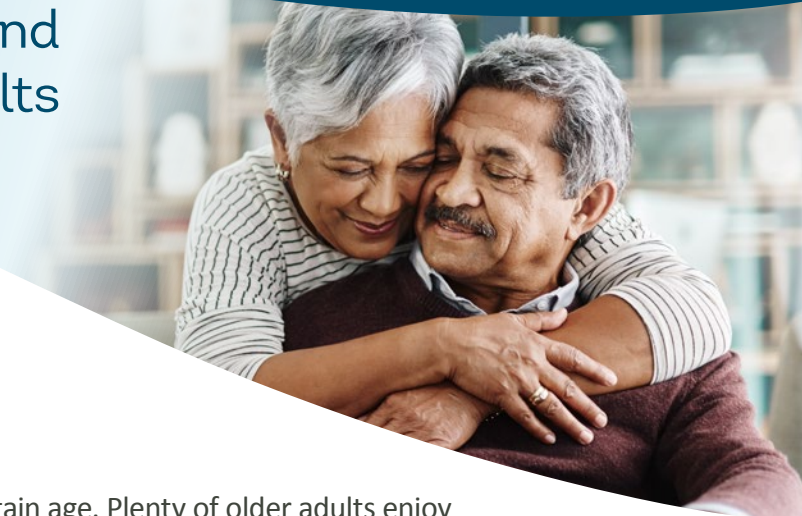
- Sexual activity was associated with greater enjoyment of life, and “a frequent and problem-free sex life” is linked to improved well-being.
- The less often seniors have sex, the more likely they are to experience health problems.
- Older men who are sexually active have better cognitive performance than those who do not.
- Health practitioners and caregivers should acknowledge that older adults are not asexual.

One of the lead researchers, Lee Smith, stated in a press release, “The findings of our study suggest that it may be beneficial for physicians to query geriatric patients about their sexual activity and offer help for sexual difficulties, as sexual activity helps older people live more fulfilling lives.”

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How intimacy changes with age

The physical changes of growing older can affect sex and intimacy. These are common changes:

Men

Testosterone levels decrease over time, starting around age 30. This leads to slower sexual response, difficulty with getting or maintaining an erection, and a longer pause between erections. It may take longer to climax. Some men experience erectile dysfunction, meaning they can't sustain an erection firm enough to have intercourse.

Women

Estrogen levels decrease as women approach menopause. This can cause physical changes such as slower sexual arousal, vaginal dryness, thinner vaginal walls that may feel irritated during intercourse, and shorter, less intense orgasms.



In addition, both men and women can experience emotional challenges that affect their sexual function and desire, such as stress, depression or anxiety. Many people also feel less confident about their physical appearance as their bodies change over time.

Health issues such as a heart condition, high blood pressure, diabetes or joint problems can also affect a person's sex life. Certain medications can also affect sexual desire and response. Sometimes, sexual difficulties have no clear cause; an undiagnosed health problem may be to blame.

Don't ignore the situation. Speak to your physician, who can address your concerns and, if you wish, discuss interventions that can help keep the passion alive, such as medications, lubricants or counselling. (If your physician is unwilling to discuss your sexual health, it's time to find another physician!)

Good communication with your romantic partner is also essential. If certain sexual positions or practices have become difficult, try something different. Explore new ways to excite and please each other. Expand the way you think about sex and intimacy. After all, it's often said that the brain is the most important sexual organ.

And remember, safe sex practices are important at any age. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are on the rise among older adults. If you have questions about sexual health, talk to your physician or consult the resources listed to the right.

Bayshore is pleased to provide information that educates you as you strive to care for your loved ones. The information is not advice and should not be treated as such.

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Resources

Age, Sex and You: the website for older adults

Sharron Hinchliff, a psychologist at the University of Sheffield, created this website to provide evidence-based information about the sexual changes that occur with age.

agesexandyou.com

Sexuality and Physical Changes With Aging

This encouraging article offers suggestions for "staying sexual" as people age.

myhealth.alberta.ca/Health/pages/conditions.aspx?hwid=hw159186

Great Sex Without Intercourse

If intercourse has become too challenging, it's time to get creative. Check out the suggestions in this candid article from AARP.

aarp.org/home-family/sex-intimacy/info-12-2012/great-sex-without-intercourse.html

Safer Sex Guide

This is a reliable source of information about preventing sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as chlamydia, hepatitis, herpes, HIV and more.

catie.ca/en/practical-guides/safer-sex-guide

The Ultimate Guide to Sex After 50: How to Maintain – or Regain – a Spicy, Satisfying Sex Life

by Joan Price (Cleis Press, 2015)

Written by a "senior expert," this book discusses medical challenges, loss of intimacy, dating, self-pleasuring and more.

Available online at amazon.ca and chapters.indigo.ca.

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