

Enjoying Sex in Later Life

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Media images imply that sex is a young adult domain, but new research proves age need not be a barrier to sexual fulfillment.

"People have stereotypes that seniors' sexuality isn't important, but the majority (of seniors) are interested and want to perform," says Linda Bryant, Director of Senior Services, Hunterdon Medical Center.

The 2003 AARP Modern Maturity Sexuality Survey found that while the frequency of sexual activity decreases with age, more than 50 percent of older men and women with regular partners have sexual intercourse weekly; more than 70 percent have it at least once or twice a month.

Approximately two-thirds of the older adults polled were extremely or very satisfied with their physical relationships. More than 50 percent of men and 85 percent of women report illness has not impaired their sex lives--even at age 75 and older.

The survey results did not surprise Beverly Whipple, PhD, professor emerita of Rutgers University.

"Many older people were always having sex. Activity with partners or by themselves is nothing new, but we're more open about it. That's happened since Viagra. Older adults are out of the closet talking about sexuality. Prior to Viagra, only 10 percent of men with erectile dysfunction even went in for treatment," says Whipple.

Whipple is highly regarded in the field of sexuality research, and her groundbreaking work includes the discovery of the G-spot, a sexually responsive area within the vagina. Many of her workshops focus on teaching seniors and others to view sexual activity in a broader, more fulfilling manner.

"We have a focus in our society on vaginal intercourse, but I do workshops on intimacy that focus on everything but the genitals...I created a matrix that helps people map areas of their body that are pleasurable, which could include a big toe or hand holding," says Whipple.

Whipple advises seniors to toss out the assumption that satisfying sexual activity must end in orgasm.

"We're so goal-oriented in our society that we view sexual activity as a staircase, with orgasm at the top. People tend to go from the floor to the top step, ignoring anything between. I teach people to see sex as a circle. Any activity on the circle can be an end in itself, even if it's just kissing or hugging. It's very life affirming," says Whipple.

Free of the demands of work and raising families, seniors may find themselves ready to reconnect with their sexuality. Expert advice can be helpful.

The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, more commonly referred to as SEICUS, recently released a manual that helps sex educators address the concerns of adults in middle and later life.

"Sexuality is a natural and healthy part of living that lasts throughout the lifecycle. Older adults have a right to sexuality education, sexual health care, and opportunities for sexual expression," says Tamara Kreinin, president and CEO of SEICUS.

The lessons in the manual are designed to help people in midlife and beyond identify the sexuality issues that confront them, and to create new and healthy ways of being sexual in their later years.

Health issues such as heart attacks, cancer, menopause, alcoholism, and erectile dysfunction can impact an older adult's sexuality. In addition, many aging adults may experience intimacy on unfamiliar terrain as the result of a divorce or a loss of a partner.

When seniors experience problems with sexual interest or function, they should visit their physician.

"The first step is to ensure they're not having problems that could gum up the plumbing, like high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, or medications can affect sexual activity," says Whipple.

"Next, they can talk to a certified sex therapist. They can visit www.AASECT.org or call 804-644-3288 to find someone in their area," she says.

One of the important things women can learn from a sex therapist is that their male partners' erectile dysfunction is most likely unrelated to a decrease in sexual attraction.

"Women tend to feel it's their fault, but 80 percent of erectile dysfunction is organic and not related to their not being attractive or because their partner has someone else," says Whipple.

Seniors who have lost their partners may find it helpful to talk to others in a similar situation, Whipple says, and if they find a new partner, they must educate themselves about sexually transmitted diseases because today, more people over 50 are affected by STDs than those under 20.

According to SEICUS, since the inception of the AIDS epidemic, approximately 10 percent of all AIDS cases have occurred among people over 50. Over 50,000 Americans in this age group currently live with AIDS, and nearly 50,000 persons 50 years of age or older have died from the complications of HIV.

Marianne MacEvoy, Director of Public Health Nursing and Education for Hunterdon County and Hunterdon Medical Center, includes information about sexually transmitted diseases in her programs.

"When I had a display on sexually transmitted diseases and the elderly, some of the women said they weren't sexually active and didn't need the information, but the men were very interested in the literature and condoms. Hepatitis B is transmitted sexually, and older people haven't had the vaccine the younger people get today. Seniors also get syphilis, gonorrhea, herpes and HIV," says MacEvoy.

Many seniors get information from the internet because they are embarrassed or because their doctors fail to ask applicable questions. MacEvoy encourages seniors to be persistent about getting the medical care they need to improve their sexual functioning.

The AARP Modern Maturity Sexuality Study showed that a high percentage of older adults receive no medical treatment for chronic conditions affecting sex and general health.

"Blood pressure, arthritis and other conditions do have an effect on sexual satisfaction and behavior. If you treat the major disease the depression, you can make people feel better and have more satisfaction—it all goes back to general health," she says.

MacEvoy advises seniors to take a holistic approach to sexuality.

"Talk to a counselor if your issues are psychological and to your family doctor if they are health related. You may need more than one doctor," she says.

Lifestyle also has a significant impact on sexual behavior. Seniors living with their adult children or in elder care facilities may be restricted in their ability to express themselves sexually.

"Seniors have to be candid about their needs with their families. We often tend to think of older people interested in sex as dirty old men and women, and they come to see themselves that way," says Whipple.

"I know of a nursing home that had a privacy room, but the adult children who paid for their parents' expenses didn't want to pay the rental fee for the room. Now it's a storage area. Sexuality is a normal part of life, but it's usually the children who make it a problematic issue," says Whipple.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Sexuality researcher Beverly Whipple, Ph.D., offers the following tips to seniors seeking to enhance their sexual functioning and satisfaction:

- Make a weekly date to socialize with your partner. "Do something alone together that shows you enjoy each other's company," says Whipple.
- Increase intimacy by exchanging roles. Use your partner's verbal and non-verbal expressions and communication style, and be open to learning from the experience.
- Be open, honest, and communicative. "Talk about what you like, what you want, and what's important to you," says Whipple.
- Don't just say you love your partner; rather, say what it is about your partner that you love.
- Be aware of what you want, acknowledge it, and communicate it very specifically to your partner.