

Factors associated with determinants of sexual functioning in midlife women

D. Tomic^a, L. Gallicchio^b, M.K. Whiteman^a,
L.M. Lewis^a, P. Langenberg^a, J.A. Flaws^{a,*}

^a Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, University of Maryland School of Medicine,
660 West Redwood Street, Baltimore, MD 21201, USA

^b Department of Epidemiology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD 21201, USA

Received 1 February 2005; received in revised form 16 March 2005; accepted 18 March 2005

Abstract

Objectives: The present study was conducted to assess the associations between a woman's passionate love for her partner and sexual satisfaction and demographic factors, health and life-style characteristics, menopausal status, and menopausal symptoms.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted among women (40–60 years) residing in Maryland ($n = 846$). χ^2 -tests were performed to evaluate the associations between each of the outcome variables (sexual satisfaction and passionate love for the partner) and predictor/independent variables. Logistic regression analysis was performed to determine whether significant associations from χ^2 analyses remained significant after adjustment for confounders.

Results: Older age (adjusted odds ratio (OR) 1.04; 95% confidence interval (CI) 1.01, 1.07), higher education (OR 1.47; 95% CI 1.09, 1.99), and alcohol intake (OR 1.42; 95% CI 1.03, 1.95) were associated with low passion for the partner. Older age was also a significant predictor of low sexual satisfaction (OR 1.04; 95% CI 1.01, 1.07). Women experiencing vaginal dryness had higher odds of low passion for partner (OR 1.67; 95% CI 1.21, 1.31) and low sexual satisfaction (OR 1.58; 95% CI 1.14, 2.20) than women not experiencing vaginal dryness.

Conclusions: Older age, higher education, alcohol intake, and vaginal dryness are significantly associated with lower levels of passionate love for the partner, while older age and vaginal dryness are significantly associated with lower levels of sexual satisfaction in midlife women.

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Keywords: Demographic factors; Vaginal dryness; Sexual satisfaction; Menopause; Hot flashes

1. Introduction

Previous studies indicate that both men and women experience a reduction in sexual activity with age [1–3]. Pfeiffer et al. reported a pattern of declining sexual

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 410 706 3606;
fax: +1 410 706 1503.

E-mail address: jflaws@epi.umaryland.edu (J.A. Flaws).

activity in both men and women with aging, with the decrease being larger for women than for men of the same age [1]. Further, Hallstrom [4] and Hallstrom and Samuelsson [5] reported a dramatic decline in sexual interest, the capacity for orgasm, and coital frequency with aging among Swedish women.

Although both men and women experience declining sexual activity with age, the reasons for the decline in sexual activity appear to be gender-specific. The decline in sexual functioning in men is primarily due to age, health, and medications [4–6]. For women, health is less of a factor, while having a functional partner appears to be a more important variable [1–5,7–17]. In a population-based randomized study conducted among Swedish women, the most common reasons for not having a regular sex-life irrespective of the woman's age were the absence of a partner (43%), loss of sexual desire (29%), or a partner's loss of desire (12%) [17]. In addition, in the Duke Longitudinal Study [1], women reported the most common reasons for not having a regular sex-life were the death of the spouse (36%), illness of a spouse (20%), or a spouse's inability to perform sexually (18%).

Research on sexual functioning in middle-aged women presents an additional challenge because, unlike men, they experience a unique physiological state: menopause. Menopause is associated with anatomical, physiological, and psychological changes that may affect sexuality in the aging female. There is much debate, however, over the relative impact of menopause on sexual functioning. Several cross-sectional studies have found a significant independent association of menopausal status with sexual functioning [4,11–16,18]. Conflicting results, however, were reported by the Oxford community-based studies of Osborn et al. [9] and Hawton et al. [10], in which the investigators did not observe an association between women's sexual functioning and menopausal status.

Previous studies demonstrate that sexual functioning can be assessed by measuring a woman's passionate love for her partner and a woman's sexual satisfaction [11–16]. Although we know that these two outcome variables (i.e., a woman's passionate love for her partner and a woman's sexual satisfaction) are associated with sexual functioning, we know little about the factors that are associated with each of them. Thus, the current cross-sectional study was conducted among women (40–60 years) residing in the Baltimore

metropolitan area ($n=846$) to obtain information about associations among a woman's passionate love for her partner and a woman's sexual satisfaction and demographics, health, life-style characteristic factors, menopausal status, and menopausal symptoms in midlife.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study sample

A cross-sectional study of midlife women was conducted in 2001 among residents of the Baltimore metropolitan region in Maryland. The target population for this study was women aged 40–60 years residing in the Baltimore Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), as defined by the United States Bureau of the Census. Women were presented with the mailed survey as part of a general study called "Study of Women's Health in Midlife". The 15-page double-sided survey took 15–25 min to complete and asked questions regarding demographic information, reproductive history, sexual activity, menopausal status, hysterectomy status, oophorectomy status, menopausal symptoms, postmenopausal hormone replacement therapy (HRT) use, medical and family history, and health behaviors (smoking, alcohol use, vitamin use).

A listing of all postal zip codes in the Baltimore MSA was obtained from 1990 United States Census Data. It was estimated that an adequate sample size as well as a representative sample could be obtained from mailing surveys to six zip codes in the Baltimore MSA. In an effort to obtain a representative sample of the target population, four of the six zip codes to which surveys were mailed were randomly selected from among 21 zip codes with at least 30% non-white residents. To help ensure an adequate response rate, the remaining two zip codes were selected for their high response rates to previous mailed women's health surveys.

Names and addresses of women in the selected age range residing in the six selected zip codes were obtained from a commercial mailing house that compiles names from public sources (namely the Department of Motor Vehicles and voter registration). All surveys were sent by first class metered mail along with an introductory letter and a postage-paid self-addressed return envelope. All persons who did not return a survey

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