

Sexuality in the Older Adult

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KEYWORDS

- Sexuality • Geriatric • Older adult • Sexual dysfunction
- Provider/patient communication

KEY POINTS

- Sexuality is important to older adults, and they continue to be sexually active.
- Sexual response cycles provide a framework for understanding sexuality and dysfunction.
- Anatomic and physiologic changes with aging impact sexual function in both men and women.
- In patients with sexual dysfunction, a thorough medical, psychological, and social evaluation is necessary to diagnose sexual dysfunction and develop a management plan tailored to the underlying cause.
- The topic of sex is not routinely raised in office visits; if providers initiate the conversation, patients are more willing to discuss their sexual concerns.

INTRODUCTION

The population of people older than 65 is increasing more rapidly than all other age groups. There were 46.2 million Americans over the age of 65 in 2014. This number is projected to increase to 82.3 million by 2040 and 90 million by 2060.¹ The health care community will have to adapt and find ways to manage the diverse needs of this increasing part of the population.

Sexuality is an important aspect of a person's life, relationships, and overall quality of life. Sexuality is often addressed in the popular media and social settings. However, health care providers often overlook this topic, especially in the geriatric population. Sexuality has been generally defined as dynamic result of physical ability, drive, attitudes, chances for relationship, and sexual behavior.² Sexuality is impacted by physical, psychological, spiritual, and cultural factors. Intimacy describes the characteristic of a relationship comprising feelings of closeness, warmth, and shared life

Disclosure: The author has no commercial or financial conflicts of interest.

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Prim Care Clin Office Pract ■ (2017) ■-■
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pop.2017.04.004>

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path. Sexual activity results from the interaction of each partner's physical status, interest, behavior, and attitudes and the underlying quality of the relationship itself and intimacy level.^{3,4} Sexuality plays an important role in a person's mental and physical health and quality of life throughout the life spectrum. Therefore, providers should continue to discuss sexuality and sexual concerns with their patients as they age.

MYTHS ABOUT SEXUALITY IN OLDER ADULTS

There are many cultural and societal myths that exist regarding sexuality in older adults. These myths may result from media portrayal of older adults and sexual issues. In a study of medical and psychology students,⁵ researchers found that knowledge about aging was strongly linked with knowledge about sexuality. However, knowledge about sexuality and aging was not associated with attitudes, which were more closely related to personal beliefs or social norms.

Many commonly held beliefs about older adults and sexuality have no underlying basis in reality. Common myths regarding older adults and sexuality include sexual activities do not occur (older are asexual), it is humorous, it is filthy ("dirty old man" or "spinster"), older people are too frail for sexual activity, the elderly are not sexually desirable secondary to physical changes.⁶⁻⁸

Increasing knowledge about older adults and sexuality and about current sexual practices, will hopefully dispel these myths and improve a provider's ability to address these issues throughout life.

STATISTICS ABOUT SEXUAL ACTIVITY IN OLDER ADULTS

Several studies of older adult sexuality and health in the United States^{3,4,9} report that the prevalence of sexual activity with a partner in the last 12 months decreased with increasing age: 73% who were age 57 to 64, 53% who were age 65 to 74, and 26% in those age 75 to 85. In this study, the likelihood of being sexually active was less in women than men across all age groups. Sexually active respondents were more likely to rate their health status positively. In those 75 to 85, 54% of sexually active respondents had intercourse 2 to 3 times per month, and 23% had sex at least once weekly. Seventy percent of men and 50% of women older than age 65 report interest in sex. Other forms of sexual expression were queried, including oral sex and masturbation. In the youngest age group, 58% engaged in oral sex compared with 31% in the oldest group. Masturbation was higher in the younger age group and in men.⁹ The frequency of other forms of sexual expression, including hugging, kissing, or sexual touching did not change with age.³ Availability of a spouse or sexual partner impacts sexuality at older ages. In men 75 to 85, 78% report having a partner; conversely, in women age 75 to 85, 40% report having a partner.⁹ This difference may be related to longer life expectancy in women.

Among those sexually active, at least half of the respondents reported at least 1 sexual problem. The most prevalent sexual problems reported in women are lack of interest in sex, trouble with vaginal lubrication, inability to achieve orgasm, finding sex not pleasurable, and pain with sex. For men, the most prevalent sexual problems reported are trouble achieving or maintaining an erection, lack of interest in sex, achieving orgasm too quickly, performance anxiety, and inability to orgasm. In all age groups surveyed, 38% of men and 22% of women reported talking about sex with a physician since age 50.⁹

Given these statistics, it is evident that older adults continue to be interested in sex and that sexuality remains an important part of life.

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