



# Expression

Bulletin of the National Advisory Council on Aging

## Sex over Sixty

**A**ging is often about rediscovering ourselves. Age brings changes in outlook and environment, with a new focus at each stage of life – studies, courtship, marriage, career, raising children, seeing them leave the nest, retiring, losing a partner. What doesn't change is the need for emotional and physical intimacy – the close loving bond with another human being that can be expressed and strengthened through sexual connection.

Society often equates sexuality with youth, but the fact is that vitality, sensuality and the urge to love and be loved are timeless and ageless in the human spirit. Bodies change with age, but anyone can live with passion – and if practice makes



perfect, seniors should be the best lovers around.

In this issue of *Expression* we explore what many formerly considered a forbidden frontier – sexuality in later life. But as we'll see, old attitudes and taboos are giving way, slowly but surely, to a new awareness of sexual expression as an integral and indeed essential part of healthy aging. Well-being comes from accepting the natural rhythms of the life cycle and the expressions of intimacy and sexuality particular to each person, at each stage along life's journey.

**Mary E. Cooley**  
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## NACA

The National Advisory Council on Aging consists of up to 18 members from all parts of Canada and all walks of life. The members bring to Council a variety of experience and expertise to advise the federal Minister of Health, her colleagues and the public on the situation of seniors and the measures needed to respond to the aging of the Canadian population. Current NACA members are:

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## ■ Doing what comes naturally

Sexuality has always been present in the daily and imaginary life of humans. It's a natural and necessary part of life. Yet it's a subject that some seniors shy away from. It's as if once the reproductive years are over, they see sexual pleasure as superfluous, suspect, or even immoral. While expressing our sexuality isn't as essential for survival as food or water, it fulfils a need for affection and belonging. This in turn has a positive impact on our self-esteem and quality of life.



Need for and interest in sex vary widely, but most people experience sexual desire throughout life. In Canada's largest survey on sexuality to date<sup>1</sup>, more than 92% of respondents said sex is an important part of life – and responses from men and women were about the same. The percentage did decline with age, but at age 65, a large majority said sex is important. While one quarter of respondents reported that they had not been sexually active in the year before the survey, a majority of those between 65 and 74 considered themselves sexually active.

Desire and “sex appeal” continue well beyond the reproductive years. In a survey for the **American Association of Retired Persons**, for instance, about two thirds of men and women age 75 and older gave their partner the highest possible rating for ‘physical attractiveness’ and ‘being romantic’. One quarter of these respondents reported engaging in sexual activity once a week or more. Indeed, sexual behaviour patterns don't change much with age; those who were sexually active in their younger years are the most likely to remain so as they get older.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Léger Marketing, Canadian Male Sexual Health Council and Pfizer Canada. 2001 Canadian Sexual Health Survey, June 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Scott. “Sexuality and aging: myths, attitudes and barriers”. <http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/soc/courses/soc3k3e/stuweb/scott/scottm4.htm>



Many couples say they enjoy sex more now than they did when they were younger: both partners know their own bodies and how they respond, they can take time for slow, sensuous cuddling and caressing, they have fewer hang-ups and lots of mutual trust and respect – the ideal conditions for a loving, intimate relationship.



**Young love is a gift from the earth. Late love is a gift from heaven.**

– Turkish proverb

For men, the best predictors of sexual activity are overall physical health, level of sexual activity in youth, and the health and interest of a partner.<sup>3</sup> For women, the predictors are good health and the presence of a

partner. The ratio of men to women in the population plays a significant role: in the 65 to 69 age group, there are 93 men per 100 women, but this declines to about 44 per 100 at age 85 and older.

Sexual desire evolves as we age, and we express it differently at different stages of our lives. Even if sexual intercourse is not possible, or if there are no longer opportunities for a sexual relationship, touching, hugging and hand-holding provide essential human contact and emotional intimacy. At **Baycrest Terrace**, a supportive housing complex in Toronto, 35 women – average

age 85 – meet regularly to discuss new ways of forming relationships and expressing their need for passion, companionship and human connections.<sup>4</sup>

## ■ Normal aging

Even with a willing and able partner, most people notice that aging brings changes in sexual response. The changes occur gradually and are part of normal aging: it takes longer to become aroused, you don't have as much stamina, you need more time to reach the same level of satisfaction you once enjoyed.

For women, the most common changes relating to sexual desire are vaginal discomfort or pain during intercourse, usually due to hormonal changes following menopause. Strategies that can help: hormone replacement therapy (consult your doctor), water-soluble lubricants such as Replens<sup>®</sup>, Astroglide<sup>®</sup> and KY<sup>®</sup> jelly (available in pharmacies), and an understanding partner willing to try other forms of stimulation.

Men's bodies also change: it takes longer to achieve an erection, the erection may not be as large or as firm as before, and orgasm may not be as intense. Many books, articles, websites, specialty shops and videos are available to help you explore ways to adapt to these changes.

## ■ The spirit is willing...

If shifts in desire or ability go beyond what you understand to be the normal changes of aging, don't ignore them, as health-related

<sup>3</sup> Michael E. Metz and Michael H. Miner. "Psychosexual and psychosocial aspects of male aging and sexual health", *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 7/3, Fall 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Sandy Naiman. "Scandalized by seniors having sex? It's about time you got over that". *Toronto Sun*, February 10, 2000.



factors could be involved:

- Diabetes, high blood pressure, depression, and prostate problems can affect sexual desire and performance.
- Heart disease, osteoporosis, arthritis, incontinence and emphysema can also affect ability and enjoyment.
- Prescription drugs to treat conditions such as depression and high blood pressure can dampen libido and performance.

The solution: talk to your doctor – and be frank about why you're seeking help. You might both find it difficult, but openness ensures the real issue gets dealt with. Many of these conditions can be treated, or options such as injections, medications, implants and other adaptations are available to facilitate sex. If that's not possible, explore other ways to enjoy sexual expression – a therapist or counsellor can offer advice on restoring intimacy in a relationship and suggest helpful resources.



### A miracle pill?

Sildenafil citrate (Viagra®) is medication for erectile dysfunction. It's not an aphrodisiac. Arousal time and a willing partner are still needed.

The medication is highly effective but not for all conditions. Suitability can only be determined through consultation with your doctor.

Needed dosage varies and may have to be adjusted over time.

There are side effects: one in three men may get a headache, feel flushed or experience indigestion. Blurred vision is also common.

Men with angina or other coronary artery disease may be at some risk with Viagra®. It should not be used in individuals taking nitrate therapy.

A sudden surge in sexual activity has an impact on the partner and on the couple. Make sure your partner participates in the decision.

*(from the Mayo Clinic website)*

### ■ Know thyself

Be aware, however, that other factors are much more likely to influence desire and ability: excessive alcohol and tobacco use; obesity and lack of self-confidence; negative reactions to changes caused by aging; performance anxiety; and the closed attitudes of adult children and health professionals about sexuality.

Lifestyle change – reducing alcohol and tobacco use, eating well and exercising regularly, finding therapy or a support group for depression – may do wonders for your sex life. Similarly, recognizing and dealing with your feelings about body changes after illness or surgery may help. If the attitudes of your children or health professionals are getting in the way, remember that you're entitled to the life you choose for yourself – and that includes a sex life if you want one.

If anxiety is the issue, knowledge is your best ally. Ignorance about what's normal may cause you to overreact to any change in your body, undermining the ability to perform.

Learn what to expect and where to get help. Understand the differences between men's and women's sexual interests,



experiences and responses. When both partners are well informed, you can make allowances instead of unrealistic demands.

## ■ Just you and me

Maintaining sexual health is about adapting expectations – you can't expect the same kind of sexual response you and your partner had when you were younger, and you can't coerce your body to recreate that youthful response. Self-acceptance – embracing your body's sexual mellowing calmly and confidently – is an essential feature of healthy aging. Let the desire to perform yield to the desire for tenderness and connection. Of course, making the adjustment means dealing with the most troublesome organ of all – your brain. Overcoming fear, embarrassment or shame to talk candidly with your partner is possibly the best path to a satisfying sexual relationship.

Age does have its advantages: your kids have left home and there's no fear of pregnancy. You have the privacy and the time you need to adjust. Prolong foreplay to allow time for full arousal. Explore positions that accommodate an arthritic hip or aching back. Find ways to make sex more comfortable by de-emphasizing vaginal intercourse.

Physical intimacy takes many forms: kissing, cuddling, caressing, fondling, massage, erotic fantasy, masturbation, and oral and manual stimulation. Touch, smell, sounds, tastes, and visual sensations all contribute to sensuality. Accepting the many forms of intimacy and being willing to explore them enriches sexual expression.

## It's good for you!

- Sex burns fat and causes the brain to release endorphins, naturally occurring chemicals that act as painkillers and reduce anxiety. In men, sex seems to stimulate the release of growth hormones and testosterone, which strengthens bones and muscles. In both men and women, sex also seems to prompt the release of substances that bolster the immune system.
- Sexual activity relieves physical stress and reinforces positive emotions.
- Some research suggests that sex about three times a week can slow aging and prevent wrinkles around the eyes.
- The physical exertion associated with sex is about the same as walking up two flights of stairs – if your heart is up to that, it's probably up to sex (but if you have any health-related worries, consult your physician).

## Use it or lose it

- Continuing to have sex is the cardinal rule for preserving sexual vigour beyond middle age. Sexually active women and men have higher levels of naturally produced sex hormones.
- The amount of sexual activity generally declines with age, but the amount of sexual interest and ability remains fairly constant. Maintaining a constant level of sexual activity makes the biological changes associated with aging less pronounced, with less impact on sexuality.

The benefits of sexual expression for physical and emotional health are innumerable. But remember, sexually transmitted diseases don't respect age; so if you're not in a long-term monogamous relationship, protect your own



and your partner's health by always practising safe sex (use of condoms).<sup>5</sup>

## ■ Tut tut no more...

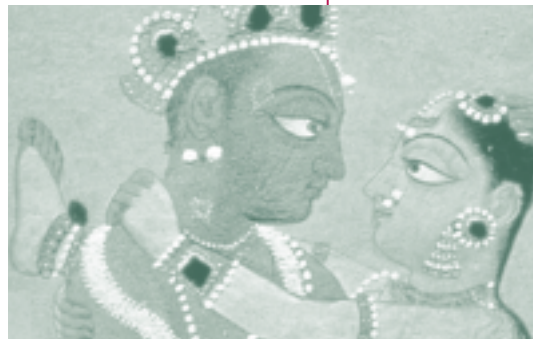
Negative attitudes and misinformation are among the most significant sources of sex problems and the greatest barriers to sexual expression. People are often reluctant to discuss sexuality. Many of today's seniors grew up in an era of sexual repression, internalizing negative attitudes and misinformation about sex. The belief that sex for pleasure is sinful is common in the

### An age-old art

The **Kama Sutra** is an ancient sanskrit treatise on the art of erotic love. The term "kama" refers to the enjoyment that people can give each other through the five senses, while "sutra" represents the teachings of love, spirit and soul. The writings state that one cannot accede to kama (real pleasure) if sexual relations are devoid of sutra

(love). Contrary to today's values of urgent and immediate pleasure, the Kama Sutra teaches an art that can only be mastered with time and passion.

Many senior lovers appreciate the benefits that desire, patience and know-how bring to the age-old art of lovemaking.



Christian tradition though it's not shared by many of the world's other great religious and philosophical traditions.<sup>6</sup>

Some seniors may not be able to – or may not want to – alter years of ingrained negative feelings toward sex. The result: poor communication between partners about sexual needs or problems and no communication with professionals who might be able to offer help.

It's not just seniors who are uncomfortable with their sexuality. The sexual revolution changed many attitudes, but it seems to have bypassed those about sexuality in later life, reflected in widely-held beliefs that sexual desire ceases with menopause, that sexual activity for older people is immoral or dirty, that sexual desire and capacity decline with age, that impotence is a normal part of aging, and that sex is only for the young. Both ageism and sexism are apparent in the tut-tutting that goes on when a 'dirty old man' flirts with a younger woman – and heaven forbid that an older woman should flirt with any man!

The belief that older people don't need or want to express their sexuality can also surface in the attitudes of adult children and other family members, who may discourage a new partnership. Do they wish to 'protect' mother from making a mistake or being taken advantage of by a new partner? Or do they believe that it's not appropriate 'at her age'.

<sup>5</sup> "Safe sex: more important than ever". *Fifty Plus* (Canadian Association of Retired Persons News), August 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Lee Stones and Michael Stones. *Sex may be wasted on the young*. North York: Captus Press, 1996.



For many seniors, institutional living marks the end of sexual freedom: no locks on doors, shared rooms, single beds, segregation of male and female residents, no provision for couples to room together. Combined with insufficient knowledge about aging and sexuality and negative attitudes on the part of staff and family, seniors may find themselves in a sexual desert – where expressions of sexuality and intimacy are treated as behaviour problems if not actively discouraged.<sup>2</sup> For some seniors, negative attitudes toward sexuality in general are compounded by homophobia: whether living in the community or in a retirement residence or institution, gay men and lesbians can face significant barriers to healthy expression of their sexuality.



**Sex appeal is fifty percent what you've got and fifty percent what people think you've got.**

– Sophia Loren

## ■ It's your move

Ignoring the importance of sexual expression denies a fundamental human need. Strategies abound for overcoming the medical and other barriers to healthy sexuality – drugs and devices, knowledgeable and caring professionals, counselling programs, self-help manuals, websites and much more (see page 8).

But sexual expression and the capacity for intimacy have a lot to do with what's between your ears. Acceptance, openness and communication are far more important than beauty or performance in maintaining sexual health – whatever your age or stage of life. ■



NACA member **Mary E. Cooley** resides in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Her vast experience includes posts as election official both federally and municipally, as well as work with the Downtown Halifax Business Improvement District Commission, the National Launch Employees Week for Canada Post and the 100th Year Anniversary Celebrations at the Dalhousie Law School. She was Chairperson of the Seniors Expo committee for entertainment and seminars, election observer in Russia, Latvia, Kenya and Romania, Chairperson and founding member of the Service for Sexual Assault Victims and Terry Fox Run Provincial Committee, member of the Nova Scotia Task Force on Family Violence and Chairperson of the Canada Day Provincial Committee. Mary Cooley is currently a Council member of the Centre of Health Care for the Elderly and of the Seniors Canada On-line Project.



## For more information...

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B. Silverstone and H.K. Hyman. *Growing Older Together: A couples guide to understanding and coping with the challenges of later life*. Westminster, MD: Pantheon, 1992.

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T.H. Walz and N.S. Blum. *Sexual Health in Later Life*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1987.

M. Weisbord. *Our future selves: love, life and aging*. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1991.

### Films and videos

"George and Rosemary" (National Film Board of Canada (NFB), 1987). An animated romantic comedy about two golden agers who prove that passion is not exclusively for the young. <http://www.nfb.ca>

"When Shirley Met Florence" (NFB, 1994). An intimate portrait of two women in their mid-sixties – one a lesbian, the other heterosexual – whose love for one another and the music they create together transcends differences.

"The Personals" (Terra Nova Films, Chicago). This 1999 Oscar winner for best short documentary explores seniors' thoughts and feelings about sex, love and intimacy. <http://www.terrano.org>

"The Heart Has No Wrinkles" (Terra Nova). This video explores sexuality and older people in long-term care, looking at intimacy, privacy, and respect for individuality.

"A Thousand Tomorrows: Intimacy, Sexuality and Alzheimer's" (Terra Nova). Through candid interviews with spouse caregivers and, where possible, the spouse with Alzheimer's, this video examines intimacy, sexuality, and Alzheimer's disease.

### Online

Many websites sponsored by public health authorities and universities offer advice about maintaining a happy, healthy sex life. Some examples:

Calgary Health Region. "Your health: sexuality". <http://www.crha-health.ab.ca/hlthconn/topics/sex.htm>

Sex Information and Education Council of Canada. [www.sieccan.org](http://www.sieccan.org)

University of Toronto Sexual Education and Peer Counselling Centre. [www.campuslife.utoronto.ca/services/sec/infotops.html](http://www.campuslife.utoronto.ca/services/sec/infotops.html)

InteliHealth features Harvard Medical School's consumer health information. <http://www.intelihealth.com>