



This article was produced in collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada.

SENIORS AND AGING - SEXUAL ACTIVITY

The Issue

Sexual activity is a natural and important part of a healthy lifestyle, no matter what your age. Although the amount of sexual activity generally declines with age, sexual interest and ability can remain fairly constant.

Background

While the need for and interest in sex varies widely in people, most people experience sexual desire throughout life.

An extensive Canadian survey on sexuality (see the Need More Info? section), showed that a large majority of people at age 65 said that sex was important. While one quarter of respondents reported that they had not been sexually active the year before the survey, a majority of those between 65 and 74 considered themselves sexually active.

Maintaining a level of sexual activity makes the biological changes associated with aging less pronounced, with less impact on overall sexuality. Many older couples say that they enjoy sex more now than when they were younger. They have more privacy, life has fewer stresses and for heterosexual couples, there are no longer fears of unwanted pregnancies.

Aging brings about a number of physical and psychological changes that can have an impact on sexual performance and pleasure. An important predictor of how active a sex life people will have in later years is their overall physical health.

The Benefits of Maintaining Sexual Activity

There are many benefits in maintaining a healthy sexual activity (sex) level in later years. Some benefits include:

- Sex burns fat and causes the brain to release endorphins, natural chemicals that act as painkillers and reduce anxiety.
- In men, sex stimulates the release of growth hormones and testosterone, which strengthen bones and muscles.
- Sex also seems to prompt the release of substances that bolster the immune system.
- Some studies suggest 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 much exercise, it's probably up to sex.
- Continuing to have sex will preserve your sexual vigour beyond middle age. Sexually active people have higher levels of naturally produced sex hormones.



Challenges of Sex and Aging

As they age, people generally experience changes in sexual desire and response to sexual stimulation. Understanding what causes some of these normal changes may help you to enhance or maintain your sex life. Even with a willing and able partner, you may find that:

- It takes longer to become aroused.
- You don't have as much stamina as you used to.
- You need more time to reach the same level of satisfaction that you once enjoyed.

For women, vaginal discomfort, dryness or pain during intercourse may occur, due to decreased lubrication, the result of hormonal changes related to menopause. Treatments and ways to adapt are available. Sensitivity to breast stimulation may also occur.

Men may notice that achieving an erection may take longer and that it may not be as large or firm as before. Orgasms may be less intense than in their youth. These changes are normal and a result of a decrease in hormones. Again, treatment and ways to adapt are available.

While the normal changes of aging can affect sexual response and desire, other factors can also increase the challenge. They include:

- smoking

- excess alcohol (more than two drinks a day)
- obesity
- lack of self-confidence
- depression
- performance anxiety

A lack of sexual desire beyond the normal changes of aging can sometimes be related to an underlying health problem.

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

Health Risks of Sexual Activity

While there are many benefits to sexual activity, it is important to remember that sexually transmitted infections (STIs), for example, chlamydia, gonorrhoea, HIV and genital herpes do not respect age. Seniors who have lost a partner, perhaps after many years together, become vulnerable to STIs when they seek new companionship.

STIs are on the rise in Canada, a trend that is mirrored worldwide. Having an STI significantly increases your risk of acquiring and transmitting the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV),

the virus that leads to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Many STIs do not cause symptoms, which can result in unknowingly transmitting or acquiring an infection.

If you are in a new relationship, discuss your partner's past history and ensure that you are both STI free. Consult your doctor regarding testing if necessary.

For men, some medications used for erectile dysfunction may pose a risk if they have angina or other coronary artery disease, and should not be used. Talk to your health care provider before taking any new medication.

Maximizing Your Sexual Experience

Some steps that can help you enjoy a healthy sex life.

- Knowledge is your best ally. Talk to your partner openly about your sexual expectations and changing abilities. Discover new ways to be physically intimate.
- Even if sexual intercourse is not possible or you are no longer in a sexual relationship, touching, hugging and hand-holding provide much needed human contact and emotional intimacy. A counsellor may be able to provide advice on restoring intimacy to your relationship.
- Eat healthy food and enjoy regular physical activity as outlined in Canada's Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living for Older Adults (see the Need More Info? section).



- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.
- Stop smoking and limit your alcohol intake.
- If depression or anxiety are affecting your sex life, talk to your health care provider
- Always use a condom when having sex with a new partner and use condoms until you are sure you are both STI free.
- If you are a woman who suffers from vaginal discomfort, talk to your health care provider. Water-based lubricants can help with vaginal dryness. Taking the time to become properly stimulated and trying new things with your partner may also help.
- If you suffer from erectile dysfunction, talk to your health care provider about possible treatments. Remember that such products are not an aphrodisiac - arousal time and a willing partner are still needed.

Government of Canada's Role

Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada work together to promote, improve, maintain and protect the health of Canadians. Together, they gather and disseminate information on healthy, balanced lifestyles – including the sexual health of Canada's seniors.

Need More Info?

Contact:

Division of Aging and Seniors
Public Health Agency of Canada
Ottawa, ON K1A 1B4
Tel: (613) 952-7606
Fax: (613) 957-9938
Email: seniors@phac-aspc.gc.ca
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/>

National Advisory Council on Aging. "Sex over Sixty."

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Online:

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Online:

<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/pau-uap/paguide/older/index.html>

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- Léger Marketing, Canadian Male Sexual Health Council and Pfizer Canada. 2001 Canadian Sexual Health Survey, June 2001.
- Rosenthal, S. H. Sex over 40. New York: Putnam, 2000.
- Stones, L. and M. Stones. Sex may be wasted on the young. North York: Captus Press, 1999.

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