



# Sexuality in the Aging

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# The Question of Sex in the Elderly





# Sex

Immune  
System

Endorphins

*Increase  
breathing  
and  
circulation*



# **The Myth of the Asexual Older Person**



**MYTH**

*The elderly do not or should not have sex.*

**FACT**

*If an older person is physically able and has a partner, sexual activity and satisfaction with sex can persist well into the 90s.*



***MYTH***

***Sexual problems are just part of normal aging, without any solutions.***

***FACT***

***Physicians are trained to address issues of sexuality in an unbiased, empathetic, and non-judgmental manner.***




# Case 1


A vibrant, robust 75-year-old widower visits his doctor for a routine check-up. As the doctor reviews the patient's pillboxes, he notices a small Tylenol bottle with a large 'V' inscribed on it. The patient explains, "That's for my lady friends in Florida." The perplexed doctor's look evoked further explanation: "My urologist gave me Viagra for when I'm in Florida, I have a few lady friends that I visit with." During the summer, the patient lives with his daughter in Rhode Island, which doesn't allow for much privacy. In the winter, he lives alone in his condominium in Florida, giving him plenty of opportunity for sexual intimacy with his lady friends. This healthy and physically active elderly gentleman remains sexually active with the help of medications to treat his mild erectile dysfunction.




# What do the Statistics Show?



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- 87% of married men and 89% of married women in the 60-64 age range are sexually active.
  - 54% of sexually active older people have sex at least two to three times a month.

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- Oral sex is reported by 58% of sexually active people aged 57-64 and by 31% of those aged 75-85.
  - Masturbation is reported by 52% of men and 25% of women in an intimate relationship and by 55% of men and 23% of women not in relationships.



**How does sexuality  
and  
sexual function  
change as we age?**




# Changes in Women

- Lower libido and/or slowing of sexual arousal
- Hot flashes and/or night sweats
- Sleep disturbances
- Emotional changes such as irritability, mood swings or depression
- Vaginal dryness and itching
- Increased sensitivity to sounds
- Dry skin
- Weight gain and/or food cravings



# Changes in Men

- Longer time to obtain erection
- Inability to maintain erection
- Increase time between erections



# Medical conditions that affect sexuality

- Medications
- Surgeries
- Cancers
- Illnesses effecting the vascular system, such as diabetes, heart disease and stroke



## Sex in Residential Facilities


According to federal law, nursing-home residents are guaranteed some small degree of privacy, as well as the right to “**psychosocial well-being**” —which can be taken to include free sexual expression.



# Obstacles to sex in residential facilities

- Lack of privacy
- Negative attitudes toward alternative lifestyles
- Lack of education of staff
- Lack of education of children
- Physical and mental limitations





Why are nursing-home administrators so queasy about sexual expression?

They are afraid of being sued.



# The Case of Bob and Dorothy


Bob's family was horrified at the idea that his relationship with Dorothy might have become sexual. At his age, they wouldn't have thought it possible. But when Bob's son walked in and saw his dad's 82-year-old girlfriend performing oral sex on his 95-year-old father last December, incredulity turned into panic. "I didn't know where this was going to end," said the manager of the assisted-living facility where Bob and Dorothy lived. "It was pretty volatile."

Because both Bob and Dorothy suffer from dementia, the son assumed that his father didn't fully understand what was going on. And his cellphone call reporting the scene he'd happened upon would have been funny, the manager said, if the consequences hadn't been so serious. "He was going, 'She had her mouth on my dad's penis! And it's not even clean!'" Bob's son became determined to keep the two apart and asked the facility's staff to ensure that they were never left alone together.



# Dementia and Sexuality

- 25 percent of dementia sufferers lose interest in sex
- 14 percent experience a heightened libido
- 8 percent become unable to control their sexual behavior.



## What happens when one of these patients with dementia starts sleeping around?

- According to federal law, nursing-home residents are guaranteed some small degree of privacy.
- The administration must balance these rights with the possibility that the patient isn't able to consent to sex at all, and that his every encounter amounts to an elder version of “gray rape.”



## **New Research 2008**


- **Presented at the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging October 2008 Annual Conference**
- **Kansas State University**
- **Majka Jankowiak and Laci Cornelison, research assistants at the Center on Aging, studied nursing home staff attitudes about sexuality in three Kansas nursing homes**



## Major Findings!!!

Staff of nursing homes **WANT TO, NEED TO, AND SHOULD BE** educated on sexuality in the aging

There need to be federal guidelines to help nursing homes deal with sexuality in a positive way.



# The Case of Bob and Dorothy Continued

[After Bob's son had his father transferred to a new home], Dorothy stopped eating. She lost 21 pounds, was treated for depression and was hospitalized for dehydration. When Bob was finally moved out of the facility in January, she sat in the window waiting for him. She doesn't do that anymore, though: "Her Alzheimer's is protecting her at this point," says her doctor.

Now, when her daughter mentions Bob's name, it wasn't clear how much she remembered [but Dorothy says], "He came and he went, and there's nothing more to say."



# What can administration do to help?

- Provide education to staff to encourage open-mindedness regarding sex in the elderly
- Promoting privacy for residents
- Allow opportunities for older adults to spend time together
- Educate the residents to feel comfortable about sharing their sexual concerns
- Educating families about the sexual needs of the elderly







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