

Sexual Advice Association

Suite 301 Emblem House, London Bridge Hospital, 27 Tooley Street, London SE1 2PR
Helpline 020 7486 7262
Website www.sexualadviceassociation.co.uk
Email info@sexualadviceassociation.co.uk



Sex & ageing – Women's issues

Sex and ageing in women

Today men and women are living longer, healthier lives. Sexual intimacy and activity is an important part of life. This fact sheet will help you with some queries that you may have.

Does sex change, as you get older?

There is a common myth that older women do not have sex. However studies have found that over half of women aged over 50 are satisfied with their sex lives. Women's sexual responsiveness increases with age with only slightly reduced interest and functioning in many women, except during or after illness and bereavement. Many postmenopausal women have an increased sexual responsiveness, which may be due to factors such as a reduced fear of pregnancy, no longer having to use contraceptives and the end of menstrual periods.

What changes can I expect as I get older?

Oestrogen levels drop after the menopause and this may lead to painful sex as the vaginal walls become thinner and less lubricated. This can be helped by using lubricants, moisturisers or oestrogen tablets, creams or pessaries which are put into the vagina (see fact sheet about vaginal dryness and the menopause). You may find that the vaginal area and breasts become less sensitive to touch, and that orgasm may take longer. You may require different stimulation than before.

Can I have good sex without intercourse?

Yes, most definitely. For men and women, sex in later years may change, but can be just as emotionally satisfying as before and perhaps more so. The importance is in learning to communicate in a way that will lead to emotional and physical fulfilment for you.

Does illness affect sex?

Yes, it can. As people grow older they are more likely to experience disabling conditions and illnesses that may affect how they respond sexually. Arthritis, stroke, coronary disease, diabetes, Parkinson's, surgery and the side effects of drugs can all affect how they respond. The psychological effects of illness can also have an impact on sexual function, especially if the diagnosis of a life-threatening or life-limiting illness has been made, or if the illness affects self-esteem or alters body image drastically. Illness can bring change in the structure of a couple's

relationship, as previously independent people become dependent on their partner/carer. Talk to your GP if you find that illness is preventing you from enjoying sex with your partner; they may be able to help and offer solutions or put you in touch with a therapist.

I am a widow: is it wrong to look for love again?

We all need to be loved and wanted. These needs do not diminish over time, but you may find you are seeking other forms of attachment than when you were younger. If you are looking to rekindle your love life, you may feel awkward and embarrassed. These are perfectly normal feelings, particularly if your partner had a long illness, and you may have profound feelings of guilt and betrayal.

Can I get a sexually transmitted infection after the menopause?

Unfortunately, yes you can. Sexually transmitted infections are increasing in all age groups. Therefore it is important to consider using condoms when entering a new relationship. Also if you have worrying symptoms you should get help early rather than 'wait and see'.

Where can I find help?

Do not feel embarrassed to see your GP. You may also need psychosexual counselling. You can be referred for sex therapy by your GP or other health professional. Some will take self referrals. Sex therapy can be obtained through the NHS or privately. It is important to make sure that the sex therapist is qualified and abides by the codes of ethics of an appropriate professional body. Look for a therapist who is a member of the Institute of Psychosexual Medicine (<http://www.ipm.org.uk/>) or the British Association for Sexual and Relationship Therapy (<http://www.basrt.org.uk/>).

Further reading

Sexual Health and the Menopause. eds Tomlinson JM, Rees M, Mander T. 2005. Royal Society of Medicine Press and British Menopause Society Publications Ltd.

An invitation

..... to enrol as a friend of The Sexual Advice Association. For a small annual subscription you will know that you are contributing to a charity that helps overcome the problems of male and female sexual dysfunction. If you are interested please telephone or write for an application form or complete our on-line registration form.

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