

# Still Kicking: Sexuality in Later Years

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Sexuality is an essential aspect of human health and identity throughout life. Yet, it is a taboo, which often becomes a neglected topic in discussions surrounding aging.

It is commonly believed that sexual interest and activity decline significantly with age. But contrary to common belief, research shows that older adults continue to engage in sexual behaviors and value intimacy. Nevertheless, older adults face a number of challenges when it comes to sexual health, ranging from physiological changes that naturally come with age, to social and emotional barriers. Addressing these challenges is vital to promoting healthy aging and enhancing quality of life in later years.

## Biological and Psychological Changes in Older Age

As individuals age, biological changes often affect their sexual function and desire. Key hormones such as estrogen and testosterone commonly decrease, leading to physical changes that affect sexual function. It is well known that in women, menopause can bring about vaginal dryness, leading to painful intercourse as well as a decrease in sexual arousal and desire. As men grow older, they may experience erectile dysfunction or reduced libido.

In addition to these hormonal changes, many older adults face health-related challenges. Cardiovascular disease, diabetes, or arthritis, for example, can interfere with sexual expression. Antidepressants and blood pressure medication often have side effects that inhibit sexual function.

Psychologically, older adults may experience changes in sexual desire due to a variety of factors. Issues such as chronic illness, low self-esteem, depression, or concerns over body image may decrease their desire for intimacy. Additionally, the psychological impact of aging, particularly the fear of losing physical or mental capacity, can discourage individuals from seeking or enjoying sexual intimacy.

## Social and Emotional Challenges

In older age, many individuals face significant social and emotional challenges that can affect their sexual expression. The death of a spouse or long-term partner is particularly impactful, as it not only leads to profound grief but can also result in a decrease in sexual activity. The loss of intimacy and the subsequent loneliness can trigger feelings of isolation, depression, and diminished self-worth.

The stigma surrounding older adults' sexuality exacerbates these issues. There is often a societal tendency to view older adults as sexually inactive or uninterested, which can further isolate individuals and discourage open discussions about sexual health and an active sex life. Furthermore, many older adults, especially women, report that their sexual needs and desires are frequently overlooked by both medical providers and family members.

### **Challenges for Sexual Expression in Long-Term Care Facilities**

Long-term care facilities present unique challenges for sexual expression making it even more difficult for older adults living in them to have an active sex life. Privacy is often limited, which creates obstacles for older adults seeking intimate interactions. Shared living spaces and the lack of personal boundaries can result in discomfort or a reluctance to express sexual desires. Additionally, institutional rules may discourage or outright prohibit sexual behaviors, either due to moral concerns or logistical limitations.

Staff attitudes toward older adults' sexuality can also be problematic. Many healthcare professionals receive minimal training on sexual health in aging populations, leading to discomfort in addressing or even acknowledging sexual needs. Moreover, cognitive impairments such as dementia present ethical challenges regarding sexual consent, with concerns about whether individuals can fully comprehend the nature of sexual activity or ability to give appropriate consent.

### **Gender, Identity, and Inclusivity in Older Age**

Even more barriers to sexual expression exist for older adults who identify as LGBTQ+. The stigma surrounding both aging and non-heterosexual people can lead to marginalization and exclusion from healthcare services. LGBTQ+ individuals may face discrimination or a lack of understanding in long-term care facilities, and they may feel pressured to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid negative treatment.

Gendered expectations and cultural norms also play a significant role. Older women, for instance, often face ageist and sexist stereotypes that portray them as unattractive or uninterested in sex. Conversely, older men may encounter challenges related to physical ability or the fear of being perceived as "less masculine" due to sexual difficulties.

### **Toward Asserting Sexual Health in Later Life**

Promoting healthy sexual aging requires a multifaceted approach. Doctors, nursing staff and other healthcare providers should be trained to initiate conversations about sexual health in older adults, regardless of their gender or gender identity, addressing both physical and emotional aspects of sexuality. Open communication about changes in sexual health and providing appropriate medical care are critical for maintaining sexual well-being.

Caregivers in long-term care settings should also be educated on how to foster an environment that supports sexual expression and respects individual privacy and consent. Furthermore, residents can maintain independence in their sexual lives through clear policies that address their sexual rights.

Addressing social stigma and fostering an age and sex-positive culture is essential. Public health campaigns and advocacy efforts can help increase awareness and shift societal attitudes toward older adults' sexuality, promoting a more inclusive and respectful view of aging and sexual expression.

Sexuality in older age is a complex and often under-discussed issue, but one that is crucial to the well-being of older adults. From the physiological effects of aging to the emotional and social hurdles that can arise, many older adults face significant challenges when it comes to sexual health. Nevertheless, with appropriate medical care, social support, and inclusive policies, it is possible to support the sexual expression and intimacy of older individuals. Addressing these needs not only improves their quality of life but also helps pull apart harmful stereotypes and promote a more inclusive society.

By acknowledging and supporting sexuality in older age, we affirm that sexual well-being is a fundamental human right, regardless of age.

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