

Sex and the Psychology of Growing Older



As people grow older, sex may not be the same as it was at a younger age. Accepting and understanding these changes in how the body functions is important, as it can allow a couple to continue to have a fulfilling and rewarding sex life.

Get Help!

This booklet aims to help individuals and couples to deal with the physical and emotional effects of ageing. Don't forget, you can always talk to your doctor about changes in your body that can affect your sex life.

Changes in our bodies as we grow older can affect many different aspects of our lives. This booklet aims to provide information about sex and ageing and looks at problems that may be quite challenging for many people or couples.

To maintain a satisfying sex life it is always important to talk to your partner. Set aside time to be sensual and sexual together.

Many couples want to know how to get back to the sexual arousal and activity they experienced in their 20s, 30s and early 40s. That might not be possible or even necessary. A satisfying sex life does not always mean quantity, but often quality. Find ways to optimise your body's response for sexual experiences now. Ask yourselves what's satisfying and mutually acceptable.

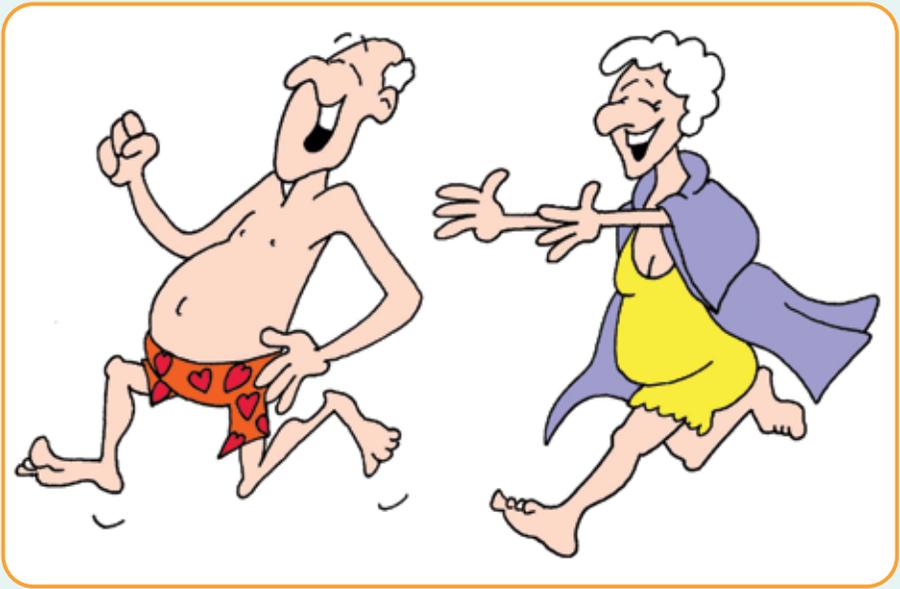
As your body is changing you might find that some sexual positions that you always practice are not as comfortable for you, your partner or both of you. Discuss these difficulties together, keep an open mind and try new positions. There is no right or wrong, a good or a bad position. Keep in mind that it's not all about intercourse or getting back to the way things were when you were younger. The key to a great sex life is finding out what works for both of you now. Senior sex may call for some creativity. Here are some ideas that might help you start expanding your sex life.

For a man, if erection problems are an issue, it's worth trying sex with the partner on top, as hardness is less important in this position. For a woman, if dryness is an issue, using lubrication can help. You can find lubricants in a pharmacist, supermarket, or on line.

Tips for a Healthy Sex Life Later on in Life

Talk with your partner. Unfortunately, many older adults still consider talking about sex to be taboo. Having an open discussion about your needs, desires and concerns with your partner can bring you closer and help you both enjoy sex and intimacy more. Although to start with you may feel uncomfortable talking about sex, once you start talking about it you will probably find it will get easier. You may find that just talking about sex can make you feel sexy. Some of the following tips can be helpful.

- **Communication about sex** can become a lot easier when we are playful about the subject. Humour, gentle teasing, and even tickling can be used to lighten the mood. Talking openly about your needs, desires, and concerns with your partner can bring you closer—and help you both enjoy the sex and intimacy.
- **Discussing** your feelings with your partner can help. Feeling angry, unhappy, depressed or helpless has a strong negative impact on how you feel about your sex life and often can affect the relationship. On the other hand, successful love making can soothe the stress and reduce the anxiety (if you let it!). Professional counselling, psychotherapy or other treatment can improve your sex life as well as your well-being.
- **Honesty** fosters trust and relaxes both partners. If you usually initiate sex, tell your partner what you need. If you're worried about hurting your partner's feelings, or being misunderstood, speak about your own experience. Use "I" statements, such as "I think my body responds better when ..." to open up to your partner and be able to communicate both your needs.



- **It is very positive** to experiment with new things (hugs, ways of being sexual and so on). It is good to discuss new ideas with your partner and encourage your partner to discuss his or her ideas, too. The senior years—with more time and fewer distractions—can be a time of creativity and passion.
- **Think of sex** as something that can keep you in shape, both physically and mentally. Remember that maintaining a sex life into your senior years is a matter of good health.

Talk to your doctor about sexual issues which concern you. They can help you to manage chronic bodily conditions which may have an impact on sex. There are medications which can be altered to help improve your sex life or the underlying problem itself can be treated.

Expand your definition of sex. Remember, that a good sex life involves a lot more than just sexual intercourse. Intimacy, touch, kisses, feeling desired and accepted are very important and can be just as rewarding for both of you. Be open to finding new ways to enjoy sexual contact and intimacy. Even if you are ill or have physical disabilities, you can engage in intimate acts and benefit from closeness with another person. As you age, it's normal for both of you to have different sexual abilities and needs, and to need more time to get aroused or reach a climax. Try to forget the old way that you thought about sex. Try to increase stimulation, both mental and physical in order to increase pleasure. Give more time to you and your partner.

Change your routine. Don't get stuck in a rut. Try simple changes which can improve your sex life dramatically. Change the time of day for making love to a time when you have the most energy. Try the morning, when you're refreshed from a good night's sleep, rather than at the end of the day before you go to sleep. Set aside more time where you can both feel sensual. For example, have a bath or shower together, or have a romantic dinner. Try a new sexual position or explore other new ways of connecting romantically and sexually.

Seek a partner if you're single. Many older people find themselves single after having had a long term relationship. It can be difficult starting a relationship after the loss of a partner or having been single for a long time, and sometimes it can feel impossible to meet new people. Socialising, starting a new hobby or going to the gym can often offer opportunities to meet new people, to flirt and start dating again.

Don't be afraid to explore a same sex relationship, although this may be a new and somewhat startling idea. No one ever outgrows the need for emotional closeness and intimate love.

If you start an intimate relationship with a new partner, be sure you practice safe sex, as you are at risk of sexually transmitted diseases, such as gonorrhoea, syphilis, chlamydia or AIDS, even more than when younger.

Stay positive. The changes that come with ageing, such as those that can occur with health problems, with appearance and sexual performance, can leave many men and women feeling less attractive or feeling they're less capable of enjoying or giving sexual pleasure.

Being sexually active (with or without intercourse) both for young and for older adults matters throughout your life, and it has a particularly important role especially in older people as sex can reduce anxiety, help to relax and give enjoyment, release painkilling endorphins and increase circulation.

Whether you're in a heterosexual or a homosexual relationship, try to understand how your partner's body works so that you can appreciate his or her desires, the different ways that you might be able to arouse and excite your partner, as well as appreciating your differences. Seek ways to accommodate both your needs.

If you're ill, especially with a chronic or life threatening illness, your sexuality may take a backseat to treating your illness. Pain, discomfort, medications or worry can overshadow your sexual desire. Also, your appearance might change, or your confidence. If you're the caregiver, your sexual desire might be compromised by the stress of dealing with the demands of caring for your partner or feeling uncomfortable that you still have a sexual desire when your partner is ill.

As a caregiver, be aware of your changing role. Find a way to set aside the caregiver role from time to time, and be a partner instead — so that you can relax and feel nurtured by your partner. That way, you can enjoy a mutually satisfying sexual encounter.

Dementia can affect you or your partner as you get older. This insidious illness can change your sexual relationship and affect much of your lives together. Some couples find that they are able to find additional ways of expressing closeness and intimacy. However, there may be challenges, as dementia can lead to someone becoming either more, or less, interested in sex, difficulties in sexual functioning and a lack of subtlety, or even aggression when approaching or discussing sexual matters. This can, understandably, be very unsettling for a partner.

These issues, and potential ways of overcoming any difficulties, are comprehensively explored in a leaflet produced by the Alzheimer's Society, which is available online. This leaflet also covers the thorny issue of whether someone with dementia has the capacity to give fully informed consent to sex. This involves the person being able to understand what is proposed, retain that information in order to choose whether they want to continue and to be able to communicate, by words or gesture, their assent. It is important for a partner to sensitively note non-verbal signs of their loved one not wanting to engage in an activity, as verbal self-expression may be diminished in dementia. The reward for successfully overcoming these hurdles can be an ongoing, mutually satisfying and comforting closeness.

Some Final Thoughts

Remember, that a good sex life involves a lot more than just sexual intercourse. Intimacy, touch, kisses, feeling desired and accepted are very important. Even if you are ill or have physical disabilities, you can engage in intimate acts and benefit from closeness with another person. Try to forget the old way that you thought about sex and what the correct sex life should be. Try to increase stimulation, both mental and physical in order to increase pleasure. Give yourself more time and more time to your partner.



**For further information
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Other sources of information

- **Age Concern** <http://www.ageuk.org.uk/>
- **Alzheimer's Society** <http://alzheimers.org.uk/>
- **College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists (CORST)**
<http://www.cosrt.org.uk/>
- **Diabetes UK** <http://www.diabetes.org.uk/>
- **Relate** www.relate.org.uk

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