

Sex and Growing Older – Advice for Women



Getting older can affect your sexual life, but you can have a satisfying sex-life in your nineties!

Don't despair if you think you have a problem.

Get Help!

Don't worry about talking to your doctor or nurse about your sex life – they want to help and they understand that it is important to you – it's natural.

Talk to your doctor if your sex life changes may be after developing a new medical condition or starting some new tablets. Talking about a problem is the first step to solving it.

This booklet is for couples and women who want to find out more about sexual problems so that they can continue to enjoy or indeed return to an intimate and fulfilling sex life.

Society often stereotypes older people, viewing them as too old to have sex or be interested in it.

It is a myth, that older women did not, and older men could not, have sex and were not interested in it. However, many research studies have shown this is quite untrue. It is now realised that wanting to be sexually active one way or another continues well into old age for a high proportion of both men and women, and that they see this as enhancing their quality of life. Nevertheless, the idea of older women and men having sex has been almost a taboo subject until recent times.

The Good News

Being sexually active does not mean to say that penetrative sex has to occur every time. It means that some form of satisfying sexual activity is possible – and indulged in. Getting older does not mean that a fall in desire or problems with sex are inevitable.

However, as couples grow older they may have different attitudes towards sex and this is influenced by their culture, religion, social norms and certain myths, as well as their physical health. It is therefore important to understand what effect ageing has on sex.

More About Sex and Ageing

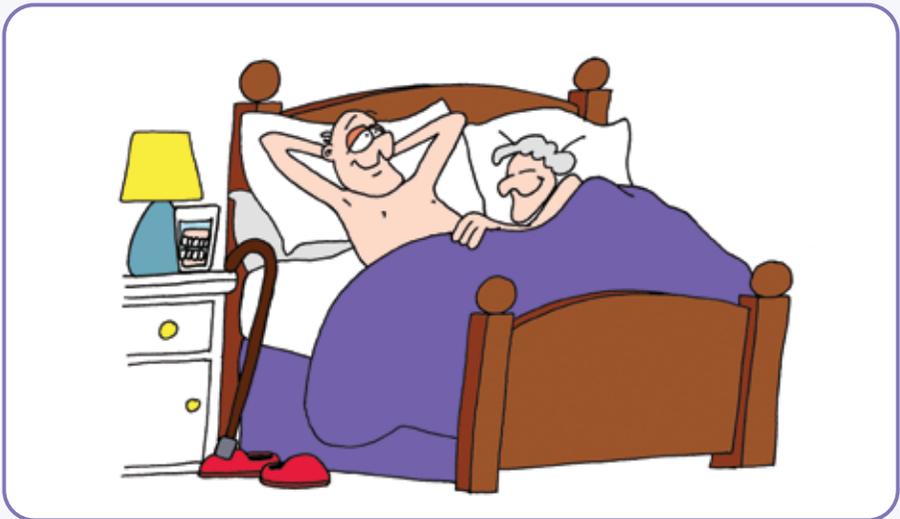
The capacity for sexual feelings involves many different parts of our lives - biological, physical, psychological and social. We are born with an inner sexual drive in order for the human race to continue and it is influenced by physical things like hormones, illness and medications, as well as the influences of mood and relationships, self-esteem, body image, and social expectations, such as what is considered appropriate sexual behaviour.

The key to enjoying a fulfilling sexual relationship as we grow older is understanding ourselves and our partners, the changing needs that we might experience and accepting each other's individuality.

Independent of age, enjoying satisfying sex is not purely about penetrative intercourse. It is about having an open mind about what sex is, thinking and feeling sexy, as well as allowing yourself to behave in a sexual way (cuddles, kisses, talks about sex and so on). Although sexual desire can decrease or diminish over the years, a lot of older couples continue being sexual with each other, and many also continue to masturbate, either alone or each other.

Your partner is probably ageing too and your partner's attitudes to your sexual relationship may have changed. Either of you may find that at some time you lose confidence and perhaps become unsure about how you would define a satisfying sexual life. It can be affected by various illnesses and infirmities which we encounter as we grow older. People sometimes have to try to come to terms with themselves or their partner becoming terminally ill. However, under such difficult circumstances many feel it is comforting to maintain or even re-engage physical closeness.

However, ageing itself does have an effect on a person's sexual capability.



How are Women Affected?

Although very many women continue to have satisfying sex lives into old age, with the ageing process there may be some obstacles.

As a woman ages she will pass through the menopause, with periods ceasing at an average age of 51, although the menopause can happen much earlier, sometimes as a result of surgery.

People have quite a variety of feelings about the menopause, which can be influenced by their personal and cultural beliefs and ideas expressed by their partner and/or mother. Many women view the menopause as a welcome release from periods and any likelihood of pregnancy. Many also experience a surge in sexual interest after their periods stop, but some become less interested.

There are changes to the body, such as smaller, less firm breasts, which can make you feel less sexy, but this is natural, and happens to everyone, but some women do experience a loss of confidence and self-esteem.

Physically it is common for a woman to experience hot flushes and night sweats, aggravated if she has had her ovaries removed early. There is a reduction in the female sex hormone, oestrogen, which may lead to increased vaginal dryness (atrophic vaginitis) and sometimes pain on intercourse, as the walls of the vagina become thinner and less well lubricated. As the ovaries also produce a small amount of the male sex hormone, testosterone, which is also removed, a women can find her desire for sex goes down.

Any change in your health could be affecting your sexual life so, if you notice an unwelcome change in your levels of sexual activity or enjoyment, in association with any illness, seek advice and help.

There is help available for all of these difficulties so be willing to seek advice from your GP. Depending on your individual needs, your choice of treatment can include:

- low dose vaginal oestrogens for local use, as a cream, vaginal tablets, rings or pessaries
- hormone replacement therapy (HRT)
- a tiny regular amount of replacement testosterone
- water-based lubricants
- self-help advice
- sex therapy

Don't be embarrassed – your GP will have a lot of experience in these common problems.

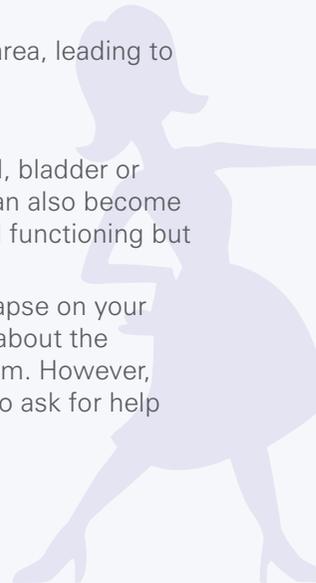
Gynaecological and Urological problems can have a significant impact on your sexual life:

- **Incontinence**, otherwise leaking urine, usually caused by lax pelvic floor muscles, can be a great nuisance in old age and can badly affect sexual function, especially if you are overweight.

Some women who leak find it is difficult to have sex and may feel put off by feelings of guilt or even disgust. **It is important to ask for help for this**, despite the fact that some women do still manage to have satisfying sex lives.

- **Water works infections often** irritate the vaginal area, leading to discomfort during sex.
- **Kidney failure** can also lower sexual desire.
- **Prolapse** of a pelvic organ such as the vaginal wall, bladder or uterus (front passage) or rectum (back passage) can also become very troublesome in old age and affect your sexual functioning but need not necessarily damage your sexual life.

One study demonstrated that the impact of a prolapse on your sexual life was heavily influenced by how you felt about the prolapse and how much it affected your self-esteem. However, **a prolapse can usually be successfully treated**, so ask for help to sort it out.

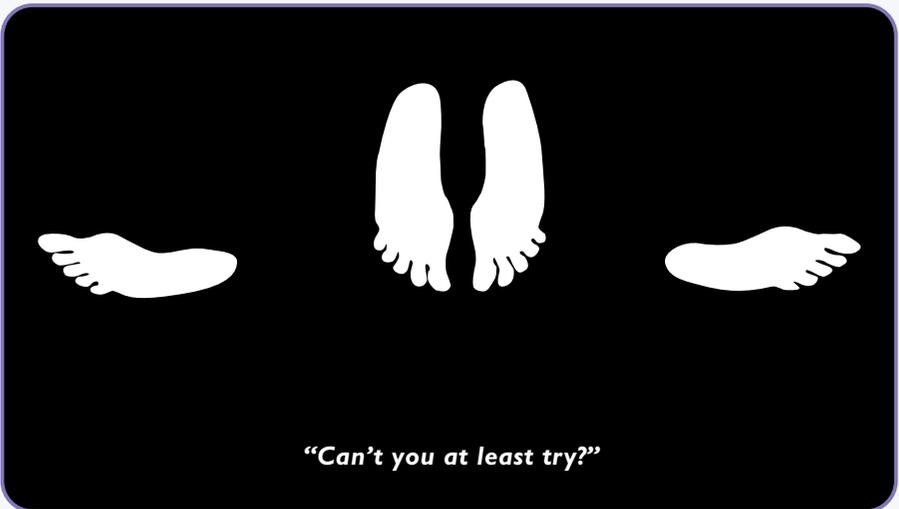


Thyroid problems - Too little thyroid makes the pulse much slower and the body slows down too. Everything therefore becomes a chore to do, and a woman's sexual drive and interest is very much less. Too much thyroid causes a very rapid pulse, causing sweating and palpitation, restlessness and anxiety. Both these conditions are simple to treat nowadays

Cardiovascular problems such as high blood pressure, poor circulation, a heart attack, a stroke or just ageing blood vessels can impair your sex life as a woman.

If you or your partner have had a previous heart attack, it may make you nervous about having sex Your GP will give you advice on treatment and management. (Some blood pressure treatments can reduce desire and ability in women as well as men, and you need to discuss the choice of drugs with the doctor, bearing this in mind).

Arthritis, back pain and other joint or muscle problems can be very disabling as you get older, affecting your flexibility and capacity for physical exertion and your interest. Don't be put off at the thought of sex, though, but you and your partner may need to be prepared to experiment to find the most comfortable sexual positions. Using microwavable heated pads around sore joints and careful timing of pain killers may help in arthritis or any condition where there is chronic pain.



Diabetes does not impair sexual functioning in the majority of women. It can however, be associated with reduced interest in sex, more difficulty with arousal and sometimes pain while actually having sex. It can also be difficult to adjust to a new diagnosis of diabetes and this alone can have an impact on your sexual life. Treatment includes extra lubrication or a clitoral vacuum pump.

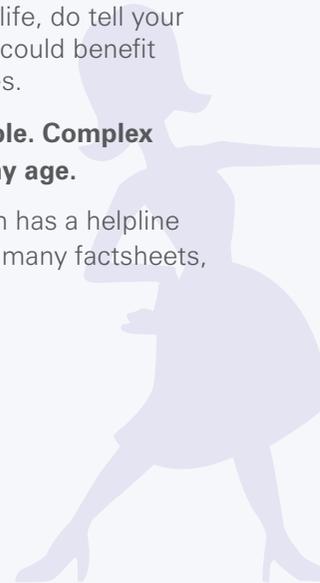
A neurological illness can affect your sexual functioning in several ways. Arousal is regulated by the brain and the nervous system, so in Parkinson's disease, for example, there can be specific difficulties such as tremor and slowness of movement, which can be very frustrating. It is worth talking to your GP or to a neurologist to see what help is available, as you won't be the only person who has experienced these difficulties.

Mental Health difficulties can affect your sexual functioning directly, by diminishing energy and motivation for sexual activity as well as lowering your self-esteem. However, these difficulties can also affect your sexual functioning indirectly. If you suffer with depression, which is more common in women, you may be prescribed an antidepressant. This may work wonders for your depression but can lower your sexual interest and drive (they also may have a big adverse effect on a man). There are many different antidepressants available and so, if you ask your GP, you should be able to swap to one with less likelihood of sexual side-effects. Similarly antipsychotic tablets can have adverse effects.

Many other **medications** can affect sexual function in women. So, if you are taking any new drugs and find that it affects your sex life, do tell your doctor and see if there is an alternative. As a couple, you could benefit from help and support to overcome some of these hurdles.

When circumstances feel overwhelming, help is available. Complex feelings can be explored in psychosexual therapy, at any age.

Please remember also, that the Sexual Advice Association has a helpline where you can get personalised advice and support from many factsheets, as well as a list of addresses and links.



**For further information
please contact**



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Other sources of information

- **Age Concern** <http://www.ageuk.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
- **Women's Health Concern** <http://www.womens-health-concern.org/>

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