

# Sex & ageing – Women's issues

June 2011

## **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?**

Estrogen 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 estrogen 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 relationships, 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 you get more information?

The Sexual Advice Association is here to help. We cannot give individual medical advice, but we can answer your questions on any sexual problems and put you in touch with local specialist practitioners. We also have a number of factsheets and booklets on sexual problems and related issues for men and women that can be downloaded from our website or requested. Please feel free to email us or phone our Helpline (our contact details are at the bottom of this page).

You can also visit the NHS Choices website at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) for information and advice on many different health and lifestyle topics.

## 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.

## Donate

By donating to the Sexual Advice Association, you will know that you are helping improve the lives of people living with sexual problems. If you are interested in donating, please click [here](#) or contact us for more information (details at the bottom of this page).

## Thinking About Sex Day: February 14th

Launched by the Sexual Advice Association, Thinking About Sex Day (TASD) is designed to encourage everyone to think about the physical and psychological issues surrounding sexual activity.

