

Safe Sex for Seniors

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW



In 1995, the Hebrew Home in Riverdale, New York, created the first sexual expression policy for residents of a nursing home or retirement community.

In it, the authors note: “Planning for the social needs of older adults, including those with Alzheimer’s disease and dementia, carries with it a responsibility to uphold their personal and sexual choices.” Physical and emotional intimacy are part of a normal, natural life, the authors continue.

Whether or not we talk about it, older adults think about and have sex. This guide offers older adults practical advice for having a safe, healthy sex life.

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Sexuality Later in Life

As we age, our bodies go through a myriad of changes, some of which can affect our [ability to have and enjoy sex](#). Women can experience vaginal dryness or diminished sensation caused by changes in the vaginal walls and the vagina itself.

Men can experience problems getting and maintaining an erection, or erectile dysfunction.



What's Behind These Issues?

Many things can impact your sex life. These include:

ARTHRITIS AND CHRONIC PAIN

Joint pain from arthritis can make sex painful or uncomfortable. Rest, warm baths or trying different sexual positions may help to make sex more enjoyable. Similarly, chronic pain can interfere with intimacy.

DIABETES

Untreated or poorly controlled diabetes can cause erectile dysfunction in men, and women with diabetes may experience frequent vaginal yeast infections, which can make sex painful or uncomfortable.

HEART DISEASE

If you suffer from heart disease, you may find you are having trouble achieving orgasm, and men may have difficulty obtaining an erection. This has to do with the changes heart disease causes to blood flow. If you experience chest pain or changes in your symptoms after sex, talk to your doctor.

INCONTINENCE

Loss of bladder control can be a common issue as we age — especially among women. Add to this the increased belly pressure experienced during sex, and you might experience loss of urine. This usually can be helped by changing positions that don't put pressure on your bladder.

DEPRESSION

Depression can make it difficult for you to enjoy things you were once interested in — like sexual activity. If you're experiencing symptoms, talk with your doctor. Depression can be treated easily.

SURGERY

Surgeries that affect the genital areas or breasts can have a negative impact on your sex life. Women may experience a lack of sexual interest if they've had a mastectomy or hysterectomy, and men may experience urinary incontinence or erectile dysfunction if they have had a prostatectomy.

MEDICATIONS

Blood pressure drugs, antihistamines, antidepressants, tranquilizers, ulcer drugs and some appetite suppressants can make it difficult for men to ejaculate or affect a woman's sexual desire or cause vaginal dryness.

ALCOHOL

Too much alcohol can cause difficulty with orgasm.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

What You Should Know

Believe it or not, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) can be widespread among older adult populations. According to the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior, condom use is lowest among those age 40 and above.

The problem is worse with those over age 60, with research showing only about 5 percent of men and 7 percent of women 61 and older use condoms.



Common STDs

There are nine common STDs, according to the National Institutes of Health. These diseases can be caused by bacteria, viruses or parasites, and in some cases do not cause symptoms. The CDC reported there were 82,938 cases of gonorrhea, syphilis and chlamydia among adults 45 and older in 2016.

Here's what you should know about common STDs.

GONORRHEA

Is caused by a bacteria that thrives in warm, moist areas of the reproductive tract. Symptoms include discharge from the vagina or penis and painful urination. Gonorrhea also can affect the mouth, eyes, rectum and joints. If left untreated, it can cause pelvic inflammatory disease. It can be treated with antibiotics.

CHLAMYDIA

Is caused by a bacteria. It often produces no symptoms, but it can cause fever, abdominal pain and discharge from the penis or vagina. Gonorrhea and chlamydia often occur together, and like gonorrhea, it can be treated with antibiotics. Left untreated, it can cause pelvic inflammatory disease.

BACTERIAL VAGINOSIS

Women can contract bacterial vaginosis if they have new or multiple sexual partners or douche frequently. Symptoms include a thin, milky discharge that has a fishy odor, but it can produce no symptoms. Sexual partners of women with bacterial vaginosis do not need to be treated. Treatment includes antibiotics.

SYPHILIS

Is caused by a bacteria and spread by sexual contact or contact with a syphilis sore. Syphilis occurs in stages; the first stage includes a painless sore on the genitals, rectum or mouth. If not treated, the sore will heal and then a rash will spread over your entire body, which may leave wart-like sores in the genital or mouth area. Then, the disease will progress to the latent stage, which is often symptomless. If it remains untreated, syphilis can damage your nerves, heart, eyes, blood vessels, liver and joints. Treatment includes antibiotics.

GENITAL HERPES

According to the CDC, most people with genital herpes don't know they have it. That's because the virus often produces no symptoms. If it does produce symptoms, you may notice painful, watery blisters around your genitals or anus. The virus cannot be cured, but can be controlled with medication. A person with genital herpes is more likely to pass it on if they have sex while experiencing an outbreak of sores.

TRICHOMONIASIS

It is caused by a parasite. Symptoms include frequent, painful urination as well as vaginal discharge, genital soreness, redness or itching, but it may also not cause symptoms. It is treated with an antibiotic.

VIRAL HEPATITIS

Can be caused by a variety of viral strains. Hepatitis A can cause abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting and does not result in chronic infection. Hepatitis B can be treated with antiviral medications. Hepatitis C may not produce any symptoms and it can become a chronic infection. It is less commonly transmitted through sexual contact and can be treated with medications. Hepatitis A and B can be prevented by vaccine.

ZIKA

Though it's most commonly associated with transmission via mosquitoes, Zika also can be transmitted sexually. Its symptoms are usually mild.

HIV OR AIDS

The transmission of HIV or AIDS can be prevented by abstaining from sex, limiting the number of sexual partners, using condoms and never sharing needles.



Protecting Yourself

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends doing the following to prevent the spread of STDs:

Practice abstinence

Get vaccinated against diseases like Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B and HPV

Reduce your number of sexual partners

Agree to be sexually active with only one other person — known as mutual monogamy

Use latex condoms

Get tested for STDs

Maintaining or Improving Your Sex Life

The National Institutes of Health recommends trying the following to improve or maintain the quality of your sex life.

MAKE YOUR PARTNER A PRIORITY

Take time to understand the changes you both are going through and take time to enjoy each other.

TRY NEW POSITIONS

You may find you enjoy different positions more than others or that certain positions help relieve discomfort from arthritis or other painful conditions. Try having sex at different times of the day, and don't rush.

TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR

If you find your medications or conditions are affecting your sex life, or just have questions about aging and sex, talk with your doctor. They often have treatments and advice for common issues like vaginal dryness or erectile dysfunction.



Talking with Your Doctor

If you're not satisfied with your sex life, you don't have to accept that it's because of your age. Many doctors are aware of the importance of sexuality later in life. Ask your doctor about how any age-related changes could affect your sex life. And don't forget to ask your doctor how any medications or surgeries could impact your sex life. The National Institutes of Health recommends using these phrases when talking with your doctor, if you're struggling to find the right words:



I have a personal question I would like to ask you.”



I understand that this condition or medication can affect my body in many ways. Will it affect my sex life at all?”

Increasing age doesn't have to mean a decrease in sexual satisfaction. Your sex life can stay as vibrant as you are. If you're experiencing sexual issues or have questions about your sex life, talk with your doctor.





Maintain your independence and
your family's peace of mind. See how.

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