

Sexuality and Seniors

Sexuality is more than sex. Our sexuality includes what we know, what we believe, our attitudes, our values and how we behave. Sexuality is about our bodies and how they work. It includes what we desire and who we're attracted to - their gender, appearance, their physical abilities or disabilities. It is influenced by our upbringing: our ethics, our culture and our morals.

We are sexual beings from birth to death. Yet, it seems difficult for some people to accept sexual expression at every age. They think there are times in our lives when it's "not nice" to be sexual. If you are a senior with a partner, you may or may not feel comfortable - or able - to continue the sexual part of your relationship. If you want to start a new relationship, it may be difficult for your family and friends to accept it.

It is natural for you to continue to have sexual feelings and it's certainly OK to act on them. There may be a few barriers, though. For one thing, you may not feel the same way about your sexual self as when you were younger. Your body may have changed, as well as your needs. Of course, changes to our appearance as we age don't necessarily mean that we are no longer attractive to others. Part of our sexuality is the way we see ourselves. Besides, it's fun to flirt at any age.

Another important thing is our need for touch and intimacy of some kind. Touch is crucial to well-being. We never lose the need for it, whether it's for comfort or for sexual pleasure. Certain kinds of touch can even promote healing. Orgasm can relieve pain. But you don't have to continue to be sexual in the same ways. You may find that your sex drive is low right now. That's OK if you feel all right about it. You may be satisfied with holding hands or cuddling. Or, you may still be interested in intercourse. Regular sexual activity of some kind, with or without a partner, is healthy.

If you have a new partner, remember that you need to practise safer sex. Age doesn't protect you from sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

There are some real physical changes as we age that can affect us sexually. For women, from their 40s until menopause, they may have sleeplessness, body aches, weight gain, hot flashes and a dry vagina. Some women feel more sexual than ever; others are glad that that part of their life is over.

Men may find that they don't get erections as quickly; or that they lose their erections before they have orgasm and ejaculate. They may have trouble with their prostate gland - urination may become difficult or they may not have good bladder control. They may be afraid to be active sexually because they have had a heart attack. They may be taking medication that affects their sexual functioning. (continued next page)

There are many medications for both men and women of all ages that can affect sex drive and functioning. If you're taking medication for depression, for example, you may have difficulty reaching orgasm. Diseases like diabetes also affect sexual functioning. Your doctor may or may not discuss this with you. It depends on your doctor's comfort and whether he or she thinks you're interested.

You may have developed physical disabilities that cause pain and affect your sexuality. Maybe there are changes in your life that are also affecting your sexuality, like retirement or the loss of a partner. Talk with someone who has been through some of the same problems. They may have found good solutions to the problems you are having.

Here are a few ideas:

- Arthritis and some other disabilities cause pain. If you want to have sexual activity, try to find a time when you are pain free and make love then. Find a position that is more comfortable.
- Use a water-based lubricant to lubricate the vagina.
- If you're having trouble with erections, what about using fingers and hands like when you were a teenager? How about a vibrator? A man who is having difficulty with erections can ask his doctor about taking medication.
- If you don't have a partner, many people find self pleasuring or masturbation to be satisfying.
- Talk with your doctor about any medication you are taking. Ask if it can affect sexual functioning. If your doctor is uncomfortable, call the AIDS and Sexual Health Hotline.

For more information on sex and seniors, call the AIDS and Sexual Health Infoline at 416-392-2437.