



**IT'S A MYTH** that passionate sex is strictly the bailiwick of the young, though you'd think from watching movies and television that only 20-somethings get it on. In fact, according to an August 2007 study in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 73 percent of adults aged 57 to 64 reported being sexually active, meaning they had sex at least once in the last 12 months. Perhaps even more revealing: the study found that 26 percent of women aged 75 to 85 were still sexually active.

None of that surprises Jan Shifren, MD, director of the Vincent Menopause Program at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. "I suspect that women being sexually active in midlife is nothing new, but nobody ever asked," she says.

These days, the sex lives of older women has become an intriguing topic of both conversation and medical research. Studies suggest that women are not only enjoying sex, but are also more interested in maintaining their sex lives as part of an overall healthier lifestyle.

Lynne Shuster, MD, director of the Women's Health Clinic at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and internal medicine women's health specialist, says older women today are more conscious of the importance of intimacy throughout their lives. "There is more awareness of aging, of changes in their bodies, a curiosity to explore the changes, understand them and do something about them when possible," she adds.

Sex in midlife, however, can be a challenge. Busy lifestyles, illness, medications, advancing age and menopause can all conspire to make sex more difficult. In fact, the NEJM study found that about half of all women said they had sexual problems, be it low libido, vaginal dryness, or the lack of a partner.

Of course, not everyone will worry about these issues. Unlike other medical problems with distinct measures of health and sickness, sexual dysfunction is a subjective condition. While one woman may think once-a-month sex is worrisome, another may be perfectly content.

"It's only a problem if you're distressed by it," Shuster says. "If there's emotional or physical pain with sexual function, then you should seek out a health care provider with an interest and expertise in it."

### Low Libido

When sex is problematic, it's often the lack of interest that causes the distress. In the NEJM study, low desire was the leading concern, affecting 44 percent of all women. Stacy Tessler Lindau, MD, the lead author of the study and an assistant professor of obstetrics, gynecology and medicine-geriatrics at the University of Chicago, says the reasons for low desire may be biological, social or psychological. "Sexual function is really a mind-body phenomenon," she says. "It could be biological for one woman and psychological for another woman." Among the reasons for low desire:

■ **Poor health.** Not surprisingly, women who are ill are less likely to be interested in sex. "Poor health is the number one predictor of sexual problems," Shifren says. The health of the partner also plays a significant role. (See sidebar.)

■ **Medications.** Many drugs have side effects that lower libido. Among them are the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) prescribed for depression and for hot flashes off label, meaning that the US Food and Drug Administration has not approved SSRIs for this purpose; certain blood pressure medications; and drugs for restless legs syndrome.

■ **Hormonal shifts.** In the years leading up to menopause, declines in estrogen can take a toll on libido. Low levels of estrogen affect the part of the brain that's responsible for arousal, Shuster says.

■ **Relationship quality.** As expected, women who are in unsatisfying relationships are less likely to want sex. But Shuster says relationship matters are often more likely the result of physiological changes that lead to



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# Love

By WINNIE YU

dysfunction. A woman who is suffering from vaginal pain and dryness, for example, will be less interested in sex, which may then take a toll on the relationship.

Treating the lack of desire isn't simple and requires discussing the potential causes. Your doctor will need to ask you about the rest of your health, the medications you're taking and the quality of your relationship.

The treatment for low libido varies greatly. While one woman may be referred to sex therapy for couples, another may be given low-dose estrogen therapy to relieve the vaginal dryness that may be sabotaging desire. Still another may need to switch medications that she may be taking for a certain health condition. "Treatment is different for each woman," Shuster says.

Less frequently, some women may be given creams or gels containing testosterone, a male hormone linked with sex drive. Because there are no testosterone treatments for women approved by the US Food and Drug Administration, prescribing it is an off label use of the medication.

The use of testosterone in women, however, is controversial. "The reason it's controversial is because there's no efficacy and safety data for women," Shifren says. "So when you use these products, you basically have no idea of what you're getting. There's also no long-term safety data." Too much testosterone can cause unwelcome side effects such as acne and excess body hair.


## When Things Don't Work Right

Even when the desire is alive, some women may have physical problems with sex. Vaginal dryness and pain may become more common during perimenopause as levels of estrogen decline, while difficulties achieving an orgasm may become more frequent. In fact, the NEJM study found that 39 percent of women reported difficulty with vaginal lubrication, and 34 percent had an inability to climax.

Physical problems with sex occur for numerous reasons. A decrease in blood flow to the genitals may often be the culprit. This can result from certain medications or blood vessel damage caused by health problems such as atherosclerosis. Some women notice a change in sexual response after hysterectomy. When the uterus is removed, uterine contractions that may have been felt during orgasm will no longer occur. In women who were having pelvic pain or bleeding, a hysterectomy can actually improve sexual function. If the ovaries are not removed, the outer genitals and vagina are not affected and sexual activity often is not impaired. But, if the ovaries are removed, vaginal dryness will likely be a problem. In other cases, difficulties with arousal are the result of deep-seated emotions of guilt or negative sexual experiences that require psychological counseling.

Fortunately, complications such as dryness and pain can be often addressed easily with over-the-counter rem-

## WHEN THE PROBLEM IS HIS



ONE OF THE BIGGEST sexual problems for women is sexual dysfunction in their male partner.

According to the National Institutes of Health, 15 to 30 million men in the US suffer from varying degrees of erectile dysfunction, often the result of advancing age, diabetes or atherosclerosis brought on by high cholesterol, hypertension and cigarette smoking. Sometimes, men with ED are fearful of initiating sex because they can't please their partners. But for women, it may seem as if their partners are rejecting them. That's why open commu-

nication about the problem is critical, says Stacy Tessler Lindau, MD, assistant professor of obstetrics, gynecology and of medicine-geriatrics at the University of Chicago. Fortunately, treatment for men can be relatively simple. Drugs like *Viagra*, *Levitra* and *Cialis* can usually help men achieve an erection. Men also have the option of using mechanical vacuum devices or having surgery to correct ED.

It's important, however, to talk about any treatment he gets, says Lynne Shuster, MD, director of the Women's Health Clinic at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota and

internal medicine women's health specialist. Often, she says, couples stop having sex when the man starts having difficulty achieving an erection. Over time, the woman's vagina becomes increasingly dry and inelastic. When the man finally does get treated and the couple resumes having sex, the experience can be difficult. "For the woman, sex can be very painful, and it can be a distressing time for her," Shuster says.

Talking openly and honestly with your partner about either person's sexual problems is essential to working it out. In some cases, the couple may need help from a counselor.

## STDs

## ANOTHER KIND OF PROBLEM

edies such as vaginal creams and lubricants that restore moisture to the vagina without hormones. If these don't work, consider talking to your doctor about low-dose estrogen creams, tablets and rings, which are absorbed locally. "These products make sex more pleasurable and improve sensation and blood flow," Shuster says.

### Use it Or Lose It

When it comes to sex, staying active can definitely help prevent problems from arising—though it's certainly no guarantee—but this can be a challenge for busy women juggling jobs, kids and hectic schedules. A big part of that involves making the time to sustain a loving relationship. "It takes a conscious decision to relax and make time for your partner," Shuster says. It's also important to become creative about lovemaking to accommodate any physical changes either of you may notice.

The good news is, sex can get better with age, especially for people in happy, long-term relationships. Without worries about pregnancy or the presence of children in the house, many people can enjoy unencumbered sex again with the confidence that can come with age. "Even if it takes longer to achieve orgasm or it's harder to have one, these are often some of the greatest years for sexual enjoyment," Shuster says.

Keep in mind too, that the desire for sex naturally changes with age, Shuster adds. Unlike younger women who are biologically driven to have sex by their monthly hormones, postmenopausal women often desire sex as an expression of intimacy. The same becomes true of men as they age, which is just one more reason sex can become more gratifying.

### Why Not?!

For some older women, the biggest problem with sex is the lack of a partner. Most women outlive their spouses, and many women wind up divorced. Once single, older women don't always have an easy time meeting new partners.

Enter the younger man!

According to a 2003 survey by the AARP, 34 percent of women over the age of 40 are dating younger men. And celebrity pairings like Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher—separated by almost 20 years in age—help legitimize the trend.

But this pairing was once frowned upon. In 1992, when Valerie Gibson, wrote her first book, *Younger Men: How to Mate Them, Date Them and Marry Them*, people were horrified, she recalls. "Having sex with younger men, oh my, it was disgusting," says Gibson.

IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW OLD YOU ARE—sexually transmitted diseases can be a problem for anyone on the dating scene, and also if your partner has been unfaithful.

"Women have to know that even if they don't have to worry about birth control, they are at risk for sexually transmitted infections," says Lynne Shuster, MD, director of the Women's Health Clinic at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota and internal medicine women's health specialist.

Sexually active women of any age are also at risk for HIV, the infection that causes AIDS. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 15 percent of all new diagnoses in 2005 occurred in adults aged 50 and up. ACOG recommends routine HIV testing in women up to age 64.

Talking about STDs and HIV isn't always easy, and certainly not sexy. But it's essential if you're about to embark on a sexual relationship with someone new, especially since low levels of estrogen can thin and dry the vaginal walls, making a woman more vulnerable to genital infections, Shuster says. Start by talking about how common these infections are and whether you've both had other partners before, including a spouse. Then explain that since you're both at risk, a condom would be the best way to protect you both from infection.

Also, if you do have a new sexual partner, make sure to continue regular Pap tests. Abnormal cells detected by the Pap test are usually caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), a sexually-transmitted virus that can cause the growth of abnormal cells that may lead to cervical cancer.

"Historically, there's been this idea that women reach a certain age, and they should not be sexual. They should go away and do some knitting and not feel sexual."

Today's older women are taking control of their sexuality, just as they've taken control of their careers, finances and other aspects of lives. According to Gibson, "It's a huge phenomenon and seen now as female empowerment. Women are starting to feel their power, and it's extending into their sexual life."

Gibson adds she's even seen younger men seeking older women. "What's next?" she asks.

