Sex is not just for younger generations. Sexual relations and intimacy are an important aspect of adult life. This is especially true for older people who have been more sexually active throughout life. While the frequency of sexual relations tends to decline with age, the interest level and need for intimacy and sexual fulfillment continues. Assuming the opportunity exists, most older people can enjoy a sex life.

Due to illness, social circumstances and a variety of other factors, the opportunities for sexual relations may be limited, physically challenging, painful or unsafe. In cases where intercourse is not desirable or possible, peoples’ sexual needs do not have to go unmet. Many people find pleasure expressing affection through touching, kissing, hugging and hearing loving and kind words. The point is that intimacy, the feeling of love and closeness, can serve as a motivating factor for continued or improved quality of life.

Age-related changes that older people should expect include slower response to stimulation, less intense orgasms, and the tendency for sexual encounters to be shorter in duration with longer times between sexual relations.

Women in their late 40’s and early 50’s experience menopause reducing their estrogen levels. Since older people generally do not wish to conceive a child, menopause may bring a sense of freedom as sexual intercourse can no longer result in pregnancy. Other normal age-related changes include:

- Breasts become less firm
- Vaginal walls become thinner
- Less vaginal secretion
- Hot flashes

Men often experience a change in sexual function beginning around age 30 due to a decrease in testosterone. For men, a decline in sexual activity is often related to dissatisfaction with self-image and health. Other normal age-related changes men experience include:

- Delayed and less firm erection
- Difficulty maintaining an erection

Did you know that Impotence refers to any aspect of sexual response and function that causes dissatisfaction for either partner?

Did you know that Hot Flashes affect over 80% of women and sometimes last up to 10 years after a woman’s last menstrual period?
Factors Affecting Sexual Activity

The following factors may interfere with a person’s sexual involvement and function, or limit one’s ability to find pleasure from intimacy.

- **Desire** – Lack of sex drive often stems from sexual relations that have become boring or tedious, and do not provide pleasure and fulfillment.
- **Environment** – Lack of privacy limits opportunities for direct sexual contact, especially for people living in an assisted living community, nursing home or with family.
- **Health** – Medical conditions, or the general decline in physical health of one or both partners, may make sexual relations challenging, uncomfortable or unsafe.
- **Lifestyle** – Smoking and drinking can interfere with sexual function by slowing the response to stimulation or interfering with circulation to the sexual organs.
- **Medication** – Many medications are known to adversely affect sexual function and cause erectile dysfunction (e.g. antidepressants, blood pressure and heart medications).
- **Partner** – Disability, divorce or death often limit the availability of a partner.
- **Perceptions** – Family members and professionals often assume older people are no longer interested in, or capable of sexual relations, and may view sexual expression as inappropriate and discourage participation.
- **Self-Esteem** – Many people feel less confident and unattractive as body parts become less firm, hair recedes, and wrinkles appear.

It is important for adults to talk with their partner about what sexual fulfillment means to them (and equally important what is not pleasurable). Failure to talk about limitations or discuss ways to maximize pleasure may lead to misunderstanding, come across as a lack of interest, or lead to a feeling of failure. Be sensitive to another’s needs and explore expressions of intimacy that are acceptable to both parties. Talk with your primary care physician and other health care professionals about any concerns you may have.

The Center for Aging with Dignity offers the Aging Series as a community service. We are devoted to keeping people “SAFE After 60” by advocating for and advancing best-practice programs on the safety and mistreatment of older people. (A5-July ‘11) Copyright © 2006-2011 Charles Puchta – University of Cincinnati. DISCLAIMER – This publication is designed to raise health awareness and is not intended to replace the advice of health care professionals.

References:


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