

Regardless of age, health conditions, many seniors not retired from sex

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Sexual behaviors and attitudes among older adults are explored in a new study co-written by Liza Berdychevsky, a professor of recreation, sport and tourism at the University of Illinois. Galit Nimrod of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, was Berdychevsky's co-author on the research. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Despite societal perceptions that older adults' love lives are ancient history, many seniors are anything but retired from sex, a new study suggests.

Many [seniors](#) consider sexual activity essential to their well-being, happiness and quality of life. And some of these vivacious seniors are finding their golden years to be an optimal time for exploring new dimensions of their sexuality, said researcher Liza Berdychevsky, a professor of recreation, sport and tourism at the University of Illinois.

Berdychevsky and co-author Galit Nimrod of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, examined the importance of and constraints on sexuality in older adulthood - as well as people's strategies for staying sexually active throughout their later years. The researchers analyzed a full year of

conversations about sex that occurred on 14 leading online communities that target people age 50 and over. The study sample included English-speaking websites based in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the U.S.

Older adults' discussions of their experiences and perspectives about sexual matters were wide-ranging and diverse. While some seniors were content with retiring from sex, many others emphasized that they "remained sexually able, interested and active," the researchers found.

"Although some [older adults](#) reported abstaining from sexual activity due to [health conditions](#) or loss of interest, others refused to renounce sexual activity. Their health problems or society's ageist stereotypes that portray seniors as asexual were not going to become excuses to give up on life - or sex," Berdychevsky said.

A sense of impending mortality inspired some older adults to cast aside sexual inhibitions or stereotypes that constrained their behavior when they were younger and to begin exploring new activities or aspects of their sexuality, according to the study.

Rather than diminishing with age, some seniors' libidos caught fire and sexual activity took on greater importance with their abundance of leisure time in later life. For these seniors, their sexual explorations affirmed their ongoing engagement with life and continuing personal growth, Berdychevsky said.

While people may have greater opportunity and perceived freedom to explore their sexuality later in life and might benefit the most from it, they also are confronted with numerous cultural, social, psychological and biological constraints, Berdychevsky said.

"But not everybody perceived these constraints as

verdicts. Many seniors were willing to negotiate these constraints, resist them and find various cognitive and behavioral strategies to continue having sex," Berdychevsky said.

Ageist stereotypes that older adults are - or should be - asexual frequently encroached on seniors' sex lives. In the online forums, some seniors recounted incidents of [health care](#) workers dismissing their concerns about their sexual health or functioning. Likewise, some seniors reported that their lifestyles elicited disapproval from their adult children or staff members in their living facilities, Berdychevsky said.

How to continue enjoying one's sexuality after the loss of a spouse or partner and the risks associated with dating and sexual relationships in later life were popular discussion topics. While some seniors swapped advice about finding new partners and trying new sexual activities such as sex toys, less progressive older adults wrote that embarrassment and fear of social stigma prevented them from trying these activities.

Although health conditions sometimes constrained older adults' physical abilities, their willingness to reappraise and adapt their sexual activities - rather than surrender to their physical limitations - determined whether they continued to enjoy fulfilling sex lives, the researchers concluded in the paper, published in the journal *Leisure Sciences*.

Learning to appreciate what they had - whether it was enjoying foreplay in lieu of intercourse, focusing on quality instead of quantity, or finding mental richness and life experience as arousing as a youthful physique - enabled some older adults to adjust their sexual expectations to the realities of aging and their health conditions, Berdychevsky said.

Like other leisure pursuits, sexual activity served as an important adjustment strategy, helping some seniors cope with life transitions such as ending their careers and moving into retirement communities or health care facilities, the researchers wrote.

Other seniors, however, indicated they were happy

to forgo sex, the researchers found. Youth-oriented depictions of "positive" or "successful" aging that implied ongoing sexual activity, which are used frequently in marketing sex-enhancement products, were distressing to these seniors and perceived as sensationalistic.

"These stereotypes caused performance anxiety in some older men, and some older women believed that both partners should have a say in whether sex enhancement drugs are prescribed," Berdychevsky said.

Sexual education programming that addresses the variety of physical and psychosocial risks that sexually active older adults face is much needed, according to the researchers. Likewise, health care providers and residential facility staff members must be encouraged to shed ageist stereotypes about older adults' sexuality, respect their rights to privacy and [sexual activity](#), and be sensitive to their concerns.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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