

New research: Having sex in older age could make you happier and healthier

September 23 2019, by Lee Smith, Daragh McDermott and Sarah Jackson



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Sexual activity is an essential part of intimate relationships, though it tends to decline as people get older. But although [research](#) shows that frequency of sexual activity can decrease with age, for many older people, sex still remains an important part of their life.

There's a common misconception that as people age, they lose their

interest in sex and capacity for sexual behavior. But as a [UK survey shows](#), this isn't the case.

Indeed, the survey found that 85% of men aged 60–69 report being sexually active—as do 60% of those aged 70–79 and 32% of those aged 80 and over. Women were found to be [less sexually active](#) as they aged, but [studies](#) show that, just like men, many women also want to continue to have sex as they get older. Studies in [the US](#) report similar levels of [sexual activity](#) across these age groups.

And the fact that so many people are still having sex as they age is good news, because as [our new research](#) seems to indicate, the less sex older people have, the more likely they are to experience mental and physical health problems.

Still at it

[Our research](#) looked at the sex lives of 2,577 men and 3,195 women aged 50 and older. We asked whether they had experienced a decline in the last year in their level of sexual desire, frequency of sexual activity, or ability to have an erection (men) or become sexually aroused (women).

We found that men who reported a decline in sexual desire were more likely to go on to develop cancer or other chronic illnesses that limited their daily activities. Men and women who reported a decrease in the frequency of sexual activities were also more likely to experience a deterioration in how they rated their level of health. And men with erectile dysfunction were also more likely to be diagnosed with cancer or coronary heart disease. It's important to note, however, that changes in sexual desire or function could have been a result of early-stage, undiagnosed disease.

Our research also found that older adults [enjoy life](#) more when they are sexually active. And those who experience a decline in sexual activity report [poorer well-being](#) than those who maintain their levels of sexual desire, activity and function in later life. We also found that men who are sexually active in later life continue to have better cognitive performance compared to those who don't.

Feel good hormones

It's no secret that sex can help to produce that "feel good" factor. This is largely because during sex, there is a release of [endorphins](#), which generate a happy or elated feeling. This doesn't just impact our [mental health](#) though, as higher endorphin levels are also associated with greater activation of the immune system—which may reduce the risk of [cancer and heart disease](#).

Research suggests that people who engage in sexual intercourse with their partner are also likely to share a [closer relationship](#). And closeness to one's partner is linked with [better mental health](#).

It's also important to remember that sex is a form of physical activity—often performed at a moderate intensity—which burns close to [four calories](#) a minute. All exercise comes with [health benefits](#) – and sex is no different. So it's definitely possible that you could gain mental and physical health benefits from regular sexual activity.

Trying new positions

Of course, sex is not the only factor that can help to improve health and well-being in older age. But as our research shows, [older adults](#) are not devoid of sexual desire, and an active sex life is something that should be encouraged. Indeed, it's possible that a regular and problem-free sex life can lead to better mental (and possibly physical) [health](#).

But information on and encouragement to try new sexual positions and explore different types of sexual activity isn't regularly given to older people. And in many cases, when it comes to older people and sex, doctors often put their heads in the sand, and don't really want to talk about it.

But it may well be that such discussions could help to challenge norms and expectations about sexual activity. And as our research shows, it could also help people to live more fulfilling and healthier lives—well into older age.

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