



## The AGS Foundation for Health in Aging's

# Safe (and Enjoyable!) Sex for Seniors:

### More older adults are having sex—and enjoying it more.

That's the conclusion of several recently published studies. New data from Swedish surveys of 70-year-olds conducted in 1971, 1976, 1992 and 2000, for example, show that the number reporting that they're sexually active increased considerably over the 30-year period. While 52% of married 70-year-old men reported having sex in 1972, that number was 68% in 2000. For married women, the figures were 38% in 1972, and 56% in 2000. The number of sexually active unmarried 70-year-old men and women also increased. What's more, the 30-year stretch saw both men and women reporting greater satisfaction with sex and fewer sexual problems.

The Swedes aren't alone. Research also finds that most older Americans are sexually active into their 70s. A study of more than 3,000 older Americans published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that 73% of those aged 57 to 64 were sexually active, as were 53% of those 65 to 74, and 26% of those 75 to 85. More open attitudes toward sexuality, better health among older adults, Internet dating, and the availability of medications like Viagra are all likely contributors to these trends, experts say.

Additional studies, unfortunately, have also found that growing numbers of older adults are being diagnosed with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The most common are herpes and the human papilloma virus (which can cause genital and anal warts and cervical cancer). Other STDs include gonorrhea, Chlamydia, syphilis, and the human immune deficiency virus (HIV), which causes AIDS.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), adults 50 and older account for 10% of all new AIDS cases and 14% of those living with the disease in the U.S. Although effectiveness of condom use in older adults has yet to be studied, wearing a condom has been shown to protect against HIV via sex in other populations. Despite this, a recent University of Chicago survey of single women ages 58 to 93 found that about 60% hadn't used a condom the last time they were intimate with a partner.

This is particularly worrisome because some age-related changes make older people more vulnerable to STDs than younger adults. Declining immunity is one such change. In women who've gone through menopause, decreased vaginal lubrication and a gradual thinning of the vaginal walls also boost risks of contracting HIV and other STDs.

### Here, from the experts, some advice on having, and enjoying, safe sex, no matter your age:

**Know your partner's sexual background** before having oral, vaginal or anal sex. (All types of sex can spread STDs.) Talk about your sexual histories, and tell one another whether you've ever been tested for STDs, what the results of testing were, and whether you've ever injected illegal drugs. HIV can also be spread via shared hypodermic needles, though the most common risk factor for older women is sex with an infected man.



### Consider getting tested first

The best way to protect yourself and your partner is for the two of you to get tested for HIV and other STDs before you start having sex. STDs don't always cause obvious symptoms. And some symptoms of STDs or HIV, such as fatigue, can be mistaken for age-related health problems.

### Use a condom and a lubricant

every time you have sex until you are in a monogamous relationship and know your partner's sexual history and HIV status. The CDC advises all older adults to ask potential partners if they have recently been tested for HIV and to encourage partners who have not been tested to get tested. Lubricants such as KY Jelly are important because they can lower the odds of getting a sore or tiny cut on the penis or inside the vagina. These sores and cuts can boost risks of getting STDs.

### Talk to your healthcare provider

He or she can offer additional advice about protecting yourself from STDs. Your healthcare provider can also recommend treatments for common sexual problems such as vaginal dryness and erectile dysfunction (ED).

Nearly 40% of postmenopausal women experience vaginal dryness, but there are effective treatments. These range from over-the-counter moisturizers and lubricants to estrogen creams, tablets and rings that you insert vaginally.

Though ED is more common with age, it isn't an inevitable part of growing older, either. Rather, it's often due to underlying medical or emotional problems such as heart disease or diabetes, anxiety, or medication side effects. Because ED may be the first sign of an underlying medical condition, it's particularly important to talk to your healthcare provider if you experience this problem. Medications for ED—which aren't recommended for people with certain heart and other health problems or those taking blood-thinning and other drugs—aren't the only option. Others include hormone replacement therapy (for men with low testosterone levels), implants, surgery, hormone-like medications, and counseling.



## Foundation for Health in Aging

Established by the American Geriatrics Society

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The Foundation for Health in Aging builds a bridge between the research and practice of geriatrics health care professionals and the public. The Foundation advocates on behalf of older adults and their special needs through public education, clinical research, and public policy.

The American Geriatrics Society is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of older adults. With a membership of over 6,000 health care professionals, the AGS has a long history of improving the health care of older adults.

