

## Sexual Stereotypes in Older Adulthood

Ruth V. Walker, Ph.D.

Missouri State University

Emily L. Bohnert, BA

University of Missouri

Kaitlyn B. DeMoss, BA

Net Health

The most prevalent stereotype about sexuality in older adulthood is that *older adults do not have or want to have sex*. This is often due to ageist attitudes whereby older adult sexuality is viewed with disgust. The reality is that older adults continue to engage in sexual activity, and broaden their conceptualization of sexual behavior, into their 70s, 80s, and beyond. In fact, sexual activity is often reported as an integral part of the lives of older adults.

### **Older Adults Are Ugly and Undesirable**

One of the reasons older adults are viewed as asexual is the biased belief that *older adults are not attractive anymore and are therefore undesirable as a sexual partner*. Because our culture equates beauty with youth, older adults are perceived as less desirable. Although older adults are generally rated less attractive than younger adults, older adults find older faces more attractive than younger adults. Older men do report attractiveness as important when looking for a new partner and consistently marry women younger than themselves. However, older women report that abilities, not attractiveness, is important when selecting a partner.

### **Older Adults Should Not Be Having Sex**

Due to the view of older adults as undesirable, there is a prevailing belief that *older adults should not be engaging in sexual activity and behaviors*. Younger adults implicitly cater to these ageist ideals, as they favor younger adult's engagement in sexual activity over older adults, with men having a stronger aging bias than women. Healthcare professionals carry ageist attitudes towards sexual activity, particularly in nursing homes, where residents are often mocked or face physical barriers preventing sexual expression. Sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing recommendations by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the US Preventative Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommend testing through age 64 and 55, respectively, implying sexual activity ceases after a certain age.

### **Older Adults Are Physically Incapable of Having Sex**

Given the prevalent stereotypes about older adult health as poor, it is not surprising to find that many people believe that *older adults are physically too frail to have sex*. Although older adults may face health problems as they age, it does not mean they are physically incapable of engaging in sexual intercourse. In fact, sexual activity has health benefits such as increased relaxation, decreased pain sensitivity, improved cardiovascular health, and lower levels of depression. Further, older adults experiencing health-related sexual concerns can benefit from open discussions with their primary care physicians and partners to determine if accommodations can be made to improve their sexual health (i.e., medication changes, alternative positions).

### **Sex is Less Enjoyable in Older Adulthood**

A combination of biased beliefs and perceptions of older adults, including the view that older adults are unattractive, undesirable, and frail, are interwoven into the stereotype that *sex is less enjoyable in older adulthood*. However, researchers have found that sexual quality of life (SQoL) increases with age. This may be due to an increase in sexual wisdom over time.

However, women did report significantly lower SQoL compared to men. This is likely due to gendered societal sexual norms that prioritize male pleasure.

### **Older Adults Are Not at Risk for STIs**

The prevalence of the asexuality myth in older adulthood has led to the mistaken belief that *older adults are not at risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases or infections*.

Because older generations were not socialized to utilize condoms in younger adulthood, many are under the misperception that they are not susceptible to STIs. Thus, it is not surprising that high rates of older adults do not report using a condom or being tested for STIs. Further, the aversion of health care professionals to discuss sexual health with older clients, has contributed to a significant raise in the rates of STIs in older adults.

### **Effects of Stereotypes**

The prevalence of age-related stereotypes about sexuality can lead to older adults believing these stereotypes are true about themselves. This results in the loss of enjoyment and interest in sexual activity. Women and gay men are particularly vulnerable to internalizing the belief that they are undesirable in old age, resulting in less desire to engage in sexual activity.

### **Further Reading**

Forbes, M. K., Eaton, N. R., & Krueger, R. F. (2017). Sexual Quality of Life and Aging: A Prospective Study of a Nationally Representative Sample. *Journal of Sex Research, 54*(2), 137-148.

Schick, V., Herbenick, D., Reece, M., Sanders, S. A., Dodge, B., Middlestadt, S. E., & Fortenberry, J. D. (2010). Sexual behaviors, condom use, and sexual health of Americans over 50: Implications for sexual health promotion for older adults. *Journal of Sexual Medicine, 7*315-329. doi:10.1111/j.1743-6109.2010.02013.x

Syme, M. L. (2014). The evolving concept of older adults sexual behavior and its benefits.  
*Generations*, 35-41.