

Where to get help

If you are worried you have a sexually transmitted disease, either to talk to your GP or visit an NHS GUM or sexual health clinic. Information and tests are free and confidential at a clinic. To find out where your nearest clinic is, ring the Sexual Health Helpline for North Wales on 01745 443301 or NHS Direct on 0845 45 47

To get the Age Concern factsheet for lesbian, gay and bisexual older people, or other general information, ring Age Concern North East Wales on 0845 0549969.

Useful websites:

For information on healthy ageing, including sexual health:

www.ageconcern.org.uk

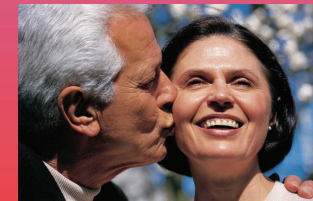
www.helptheaged.org.uk

For information on condom use:

www.durex.com



A Happy and Healthy Sex Life as you get Older



Nothing decided about us, without us

A Happy and Healthy Sex Life?

Our society does not really expect older people to be sexually active – magazines and television often leave you with the impression that sex is strictly for the under 50s and there is a common belief that your sex drive simply disappears as you get older. However, the reality is that many older people are interested in sex and it can play an important role in your life, whether you have been in a long-term relationship or are embarking on a new one.

A healthy sex life is not just about the physical activity – sex can help people to feel wanted, trusted, treasured and alive. Research shows that sexually active older people live longer and stay healthier than their celibate counterparts.



Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender?



There are lots of assumptions made about older people but probably one of the most common is that all older people are heterosexual. This is obviously not true as everyone gets older, whatever their sexuality! You may have always been open about your sexuality, you may have always kept it to yourself or you may now be recognising sexual feelings that you have not allowed to emerge in the past.

Although lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgenders face many of the same health concerns as other older people, it can be more difficult to seek and get help. A good GP is a vital first stage and it is important to be able to discuss your sexual orientation with him/her. If you are not comfortable about talking about your sexuality with your GP, look for a practice that is more approachable. You could do this by visiting or phoning and seeing what their response is like or by contacting the Local Health Board for their advice. Alternatively, your local sexual health clinic will be able to offer advice.

Age Concern also have a factsheet specifically aimed at older lesbian, gay and bisexual older people: 'Planning for later life as a lesbian, gay man or bisexual person'.

Safe sex

Most sexual activity with a partner carries some risk. The best protection is to use a condom (male or female) throughout the act of intercourse. Other barrier methods such as the cap or diaphragm only offer a little protection against infection. These days it is easy to get condoms. They are available to purchase from many chemists, pubs and other public places. You can also get a free supply through your GP or by going to a sexual health clinic.

The most common reason for forgetting to practice safe sex is drinking too much. If that is likely to be you, plan ahead.

Signs of sexually transmitted diseases

A sexually transmitted disease (STD) is an infection that is spread through sexual contact. Sometimes you may contract the disease but **show no symptoms**. Therefore, if you do have regular unprotected sex, it is important to have a check up and you may also be advised to have a hepatitis B injection. Most STDs can be completely cured if found early enough but if left untreated, they can become painful and uncomfortable and can cause permanent damage to your health.

Some signs of STDs include:

- Pain when you pass urine
- Increased vaginal discharge (for women)
- Infectious sores and blisters in the genital area
- Warts on or around the penis, anus or vagina

Changes to your body

Women

Many women find that their feelings about sex change during or after the menopause. For some, the relief of no longer having to worry about getting pregnant can lead to more relaxed feelings about sex. Others can feel that fertility is what made them sexual or attractive in the first place and so can lose confidence.

Changes in hormone levels that come with the menopause can increase a woman's sex drive but other physical changes, including changes to the vagina, mean that there is less lubrication which can make sex more painful. Taking things more slowly to allow your body time to produce more natural lubricants can help, as can buying a water-based lubricant from the chemist. If you can, make applying the lubricant part of the fun build up to full penetration.



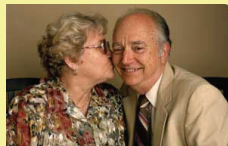
Men

As men get older, it can take longer to get an erection and it may not be as firm as it used to be. A firm erection depends on a good supply of blood to the penis and men who have conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, hardened arteries and diabetes are more likely to experience problems. Indeed, erection problems can act as an early warning system for these conditions. If you have a consistent change, have a word with your GP.

Drinking too much alcohol can make it more difficult to have or keep an erection and regularly drinking over the recommended limits can have a more fundamental effect on your sex drive as it can reduce the production of the hormone testosterone. Smoking also increases the risk of having smaller and softer erections.

Some medicines can also cause difficulty with erections. These include some treatments for arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure and depression. Treatment for erection difficulties has a high success rate. There are a range of treatments available including:

- Tablets such as Viagra
- Gels and injections that are applied directly to the penis
- Vacuum pumps
- Penile rods or tubes
- Surgical implants
- Counselling, if the cause is psychological.



Safe Dating



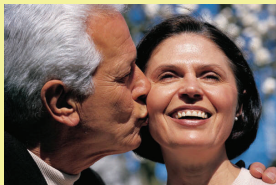
- If you are replying to a lonely heart's advert, never give personal details such as your address or surname. It is not unknown for address details to be obtained by having just a telephone number, so be guarded about giving out your telephone number.
- Always arrange to meet in a busy public place, preferably in the daytime, until you are sure of the other person's identity and feel comfortable about them.
- Try and take a friend along, at least at the beginning to meet your date. Work out a pre-arranged signal with your friend to indicate whether you would prefer your friend to stay with you.
- Tell someone where you are going, who with (including name, phone number and address) and when you will be back.
- Initially don't go home with your date, DON'T invite them back to your home or accept a lift.
- Plan how you are going to get home.
- Carry a personal alarm and know how to use it to shock and disorientate an assailant so that you can get away.
- Pay attention to your instincts. If you feel uneasy about someone, there may be a reason. Don't tell yourself that you're being silly, be careful not to give them personal details about yourself and don't arrange a second date.

Safe dating and safe sex

Many older people are now dating or starting new relationships. If you are meeting someone you don't know, it is important to follow some basic safety rules. And if you are starting out on a new sexual relationship it is important to think about your sexual health. Not having to worry about unwanted pregnancies does not mean that you should throw caution to the wind – sexually transmitted diseases are on the increase in the UK and particularly among older people.

Safe dating

These days, there are many different ways of meeting new partners including dating through personal ads and the internet. Magazines aimed at older people will often carry contact ads and there are websites aimed at older people. Many older people may seek partners for companionship as much as for a sexual relationship. However meeting new people for the first time carries risks and you need to ensure that you are safe. The guidelines on the next page from the Suzy Lamplugh Trust can help:



Better sex in later life



Here are some tips from Help the Aged for maintaining a happy sex life in later life:

- Change positions if you have pain;
- Try using a water-based lubricant such as KY Jelly;
- Try sex in the morning, when you're more relaxed;
- Use touch and massage with each other;
- Take painkillers before starting to have sex, if prescribed them;
- Don't only stick to set times and days for sex – be spontaneous;
- Make sure you have enough time without interruptions;
- Find out the possible side-effects of any medication you are taking and discuss these with your doctor – particularly if they are likely to affect your sex drive;
- Don't assume you are 'past it' because of physical problems during sex;
- Don't always judge good sex on having an orgasm;
- Avoid too much alcohol before having sex;
- Try not to have sex after a heavy meal;
- Don't assume that a lower sex drive or sexual problems are to do with age – it may be linked to medication;
- Don't assume penetration is the only real way to sexual fulfilment;
- And finally – don't be anxious about seeking help.