

Seniors, new poll says, are still sexy after all these years - CNN

 [cnn.com/2018/05/09/health/senior-sex-kerner/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/09/health/senior-sex-kerner/index.html)

Story highlights

- 40% of Americans between ages 65 and 80 are sexually active, according to a new national poll
- 17% of older adults said they have talked with their doctor about sexual health in the past two years

Conducted by the University of Michigan Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation, the poll of more than 1,000 Americans found that 40% of those between ages 65 and 80 are sexually active. Regardless of whether they have a romantic partner, two-thirds of respondents say they're interested in sex, and more than half say that sex is important to their quality of life.

Such findings don't come as a surprise to my colleagues. "Although it is true that our sexual functioning changes as we age, the idea that the 'good old days' are behind us is simply incorrect," sex therapist Kimberly Resnick Anderson said. "I treat men and women well in to their 80s who want to improve and maintain their sexual health and satisfaction."

Psychologist Rachel Needle added, "there is this myth that the elderly are not having or are not interested in having sex. We are all sexual beings from birth to death. Our sexuality does change throughout our lives -- but that doesn't mean it changes for the worse."

Indeed, sex can and does remain a satisfying part of life for many older people, although what that means can differ from person to person and can evolve over time. For instance, seniors may be less concerned with actual intercourse than with the feelings of closeness that accompany sex.

"The definition of sex is usually greatly expanded for seniors," sex therapist Lawrence Siegel explained. "The focus tends to be more on intimacy, erotic connection, self-validation and feelings of satisfaction rather than performance, 'potency' and orgasm."

Older couples may prefer more intimate and erotic activities, such as kissing and caressing each other, especially when physical limitations make certain positions a challenge. This puts pleasure, rather than the specific goal of orgasm or sexual performance, front and center.

"There's an awareness and acceptance that sexual experiences ebb and flow, and not every time is going to be fireworks," psychotherapist Lisa B. Schwartz said. "I think older people have learned the wisdom that what matters is their personal contentment and have stopped comparing themselves to others."

All these factors may help explain another of the poll's findings: More than 70% of the respondents said they felt satisfied with their sex lives. This seems like a healthy percentage of satisfied folks, and in my own clinical experience, I often find that older people are more content in their sex lives than younger people.

But there's unsettling news, too. Despite poll numbers that clearly suggest that many older Americans are engaging in sexual activity, few of them are discussing it with their physicians. In fact, the poll found that just 17% of older adults said they have talked with their doctor or other health care provider about sexual health in the past two years.

"In my clinical practice, my patients of all ages tell me that their physicians don't ask about their sexual satisfaction," sex therapist Deborah Fox said. "If patients bring up the topic, they often find their physicians are perceptively uncomfortable."

That's a problem, because older patients are more likely to be coping with chronic illness, pain, hormonal shifts, disability and other concerns that can impact sexuality. "What happens when you have an older person with a disability or living in a facility or an older woman concerned about changes in her sexual pleasure or functioning?" sex therapist Michael A. Vigorito asked. "It all conspires against sexual health and pleasure from being prioritized as important."

Worse, sexually transmitted infections are on the rise in seniors. That's probably due to a combination of factors, including the fact that older people who are newly widowed or divorced are jumping back into the dating pool after years of monogamy. The colleagues I spoke with stressed the critical need for more physicians to have frank conversations about sex with their older patients.

One thing is clear: It's entirely possible for people over 65 to enjoy the awakening of a new sexual prime. "Whereas a body driven by hormones may be powerful in many ways for younger people, I feel that a mind driven by a sexual awaking can be even more powerful," sexologist Dawn Michael said. So don't write off the idea of a healthy, satisfying sex life as you age; things may only get better.