Aging Lifestyles: Doctors lay bare the facts about senior sexuality

by Joe_Volz

Every Sunday my wife, Kate, devours The New York Times' section on brides and grooms.

Often these days, the stories feature people older than 50 marrying - sometimes considerably older. She often asks me if I think these couples are marrying mainly for companionship rather than sex.

Her reaction is an all too common one. Now a scientific and comprehensive study should answer Kate's question once and for all. The study overturns the popular perception that older people aren't as interested in sex as younger people, said Dr. Stacy Tessler Lindau of the University of Chicago. She was the study's lead researcher published in the August New England Journal of Medicine.

"It's portrait of this aspect of older Americans' lives suggests a previously uncharacterized vitality and interest in sexuality that carries well into advanced age," said Richard Suzman, director of the National Institute on Aging's Behavioral and Social Research Program, a part of the National Institutes of Health, which sponsored the study.

The study discovered that the proportion of those reporting active sex lives did fall somewhat the older people got. Asked whether they had had sexual relations in the previous 12 months, 39 percent of men between the ages of 75 and 85 and 17 percent of women answered in the affirmative.

For people between the ages of 57 and 64 though, the answers were much higher: 87 percent of men and 61 percent of women reported regularly engaging in sex.

Asked about frequency in a month, 70 percent of men and 63 percent of women aged 57 to 64 replied they had sexual relations two or three times.

Older men reported more sexual activity than women. The researchers said that likely reflected the fact that many women are widows and also live longer than men. Therefore, men have more opportunities to find a sexual partner than women do.

"This doesn't mean that women aren't necessarily interested in intimacy and sexuality," Lindau said. A substantial number of women who reported having sex said the reason was because they didn't have a partner. The truth of that finding can be demonstrated by a visit to any church or assisted living home. There are many more older women than older men.

Emil Hoffman of Washington, D.C., now over 100, said he was astounded at the number of women who asked him for dates after he moved into an assisted living home. He could have had a date for lunch and dinner every day. Finally, he made a strict rule that he would limit their number and frequency.

"Physical health was more strongly associated with many sexual problems than age alone," the study found. Healthier older people surveyed had the highest rates of sexual activity. Diabetes and hypertension were strongly associated with sexual concerns.

How often have older people talked with their doctor about sexuality since reaching 50? The majority of people said "never," even if they had a sexual problem.

This is an important finding because it means that neither doctors nor patients are comfortable about discussing sexuality. Lindau hopes that the study will open a dialogue between older people and their doctors. She found that older Americans were very receptive to the survey and its questions.

"This openness suggests that, when asked, many older people want to talk about this part of their lives.

"From a medical and a public health perspective, we have an opportunity and an obligation to do better patient education and counseling about health-related and potentially preventable and treatable sexual problems," Lindau said.

But patients don't need to wait for their doctor to ask about their sex lives. They can bring the topic up and, especially if they are experiencing a problem, the doctor may be able to help. For example, with medicines like Viagra for men or vaginal lubrication for women.

Another area of medical concern is the connection between active sexuality and communicable diseases. Older adults often don't know that they are susceptible to HIV. Yet about 15 percent of newly diagnosed HIV infections are among Americans over 50. The study emphasizes that older people need to take precautions and especially to ask new partners about their sexual history before engaging in sex.

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