

Sex Tips for Older Adults

The following tips may help providers in counseling older adults on sexual function issues.

- **COMMUNICATION.** Open and effective communication can go a long way toward improving older adults' sex lives. Providers should encourage patients to be open and to discuss sex-related issues with their partners. For example, if an older adult is reluctant to initiate sexual relations with her/his partner because of arthritis pain but does not communicate this problem effectively, the partner may interpret the lack of sexual intimacy as a personal rejection.
- **USE OF LUBRICANTS.** After menopause, women generally find that the vagina is less flexible and less lubricated during sexual arousal than before menopause. Providers can recommend the use of a water-based personal lubricant or vaginal estrogen cream to help to alleviate discomfort stemming from vaginal dryness.
- **SEXUAL POSITIONS.** Some older adults may find that the sexual positions that they had used when they were younger are no longer comfortable. Providers can encourage patients to try new positions that may be more comfortable. One effective way for many older adults to have sex is "on the side." In this position, the man and woman both lie on their sides, with the man "spooning" the woman. This position can be effective because it allows vaginal intercourse without putting major stress on any joints or necessitating one partner to put her/his weight on the other.
- **EXPLORING OTHER SEXUAL ACTIVITIES.** For some older adults, vaginal intercourse can become difficult or even impossible. Providers can reassure patients that this does not have to mean the end of an older adult's sexuality. Mutual masturbation, oral sex, shared fantasy, cuddling, and kissing can be healthy and fulfilling forms of sexual expression with or without vaginal intercourse.
- **TIMING OF SEX.** For retired older adults, having more time may mean more time for sexual activity. It is often recommended that older adults should try making love in the morning. Being well rested after a good night's sleep can mean good sex, and older men are more likely to have a firm erection in the morning.
- **INCREASED STIMULATION.** As men age, it often takes them longer to achieve an erection and to ejaculate. Thus, increased physical stimulation of the penis during sexual activity may be needed. As women age, they may find that they have decreased clitoral sensitivity and that the clitoris becomes less engorged with blood during sexual activity. Increased manual clitoral stimulation during sexual activity can help in the sexual fulfillment of older women.
- **REFERRALS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES.** Among older men, impotence is often caused not by the decrease in testosterone that comes with aging, but rather by the effects of medications, chronic illness, or psychological problems such as anxiety or depression. Providers should not assume that impotence in older men is due to physical causes. Referral to a sex therapist or other mental health professional may be indicated.

Adapted from SeniorSex.org. *Sex Tips for Older Adults*. 2000. Available at http://instruct1.cit.cornell.edu/Courses/nbb421/student2000/dp51/sex_tips.html. Accessed May 13, 2008.