

# Sex after menopause

**The menopause can affect female sexuality and our relationships as we age. Sexual problems are estimated to occur in many sexually active women in middle age, yet few women admit to it being a problem.**

**F**or many women in later life having an intimate partner and good physical health are key factors for continuing to have sex and feeling satisfied.

After all don't most of us want to feel loved, wanted and secure before during and after sex?

That was the conclusion of a study of over 24,000 postmenopausal women from the UK Collaborative Trial of Ovarian Cancer Screening.

Ageing causes changes in our bodies, much of which can affect our sex lives and the desire to have sex.

Some women may feel relaxed about their sex lives after going through the menopause, mainly because contraception is no longer needed.

However, vaginal dryness and a lack of libido are common.

Menopause Matters founder, Dr Heather Currie said: "Despite our society being much more open and able to discuss sensitive issues than ever before, many women are still too embarrassed to seek help when things are not quite right. Although some women do not feel that an active sex life is vital, often quoting that they'd rather have a cup of tea (!), 84% of women in a recent survey felt that it is important to continue an active sex life into older age."

Men often rate sexuality highly as an important quality of life issue and sexual problems often cause relationship problems, while relationship problems may contribute to sexual problems.

### **What affects menopausal women?**

Many factors contribute to the common problem of reduced libido or sex drive. For menopausal women this can be lack of sleep, leading to tiredness, the nuisance of heavy and irregular periods, leading to tension with a partner.

Then there are all the other pressures at this time of life – dealing with your tricky teenagers, children who are leaving home, elderly parents, work pressures...the list goes on. →





Hormones, estrogen, progesterone and androgens, are all important in sexual desire and our responses.

At menopause estrogen and progesterone levels fall and androgens decrease with age, declining particularly after the age of 40.

The fall in estrogen may also cause vaginal dryness and discomfort and that can affect desire and response. Because of the role of hormones, some women do benefit from hormone therapy but, for women especially, the other personal and relationship factors are as, if not more, important.

**What can you do to improve your sex life?**

- **Keep talking to your partner, tell them how you're feeling**
- **Don't be afraid to ask for help or advice.**
- **There's no reason why women can't continue to enjoy an active sex life well into old age.**

**Love hurts – or when making love does**

The lack of estrogen causing vaginal dryness and discomfort due to vaginal tissues becoming thin, less elastic, less well supported and fragile, is a frequent menopausal problem, yet women often don't report it. A previous Menopause Matters survey showed that more than half (51% ) of menopausal and post-menopausal women suffer from bothersome vaginal symptoms, yet the majority of them (79% ) had not discussed their symptoms with a healthcare professional.

Amongst these women between 68%-86.5% said symptoms were so severe that they affected their sex lives. Many said that they make excuses to avoid having sex with their partner. A more recent survey showed that of women who had noticed reduced libido associated with the menopause, more than 80% believed that the vaginal dryness and discomfort was a significant contributory factor.

For vaginal dryness, there are treatments available such as vaginal lubricants and moisturisers, that can be purchased from pharmacies.

As the estrogen is given in a small dose and is concentrated in the vaginal tissues, very little, if any, of it gets into the rest of your body, and so is not likely to be associated with the risks and side effects of HRT. Vaginal estrogen therefore can be used even if you cannot or are advised not to take HRT, which circulates throughout your body (systemic HRT).

**Confidence boosters**

Weight gain, skin changes and the loss of fertility can all affect self-confidence in a woman, influencing how she feels about herself, her relationship and her sexuality.

**So why not try...**

- **Dressing in what makes you feel good more often than not**
- **Look at real women's bodies – we come in all shapes and sizes!**
- **Get into a regular exercise routine**
- **Play a little of your favourite mood music, before during and after sex.**

**Can't get aroused?**

**Trouble reaching orgasm?**

**Sex is painful**

**Little or no sex drive?**

If you wish, you can do something about it. Be brave but above all, be yourself. Listen to those who you know support you, rather than that inner critic!