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Living Well: Sex, sexuality and seniors

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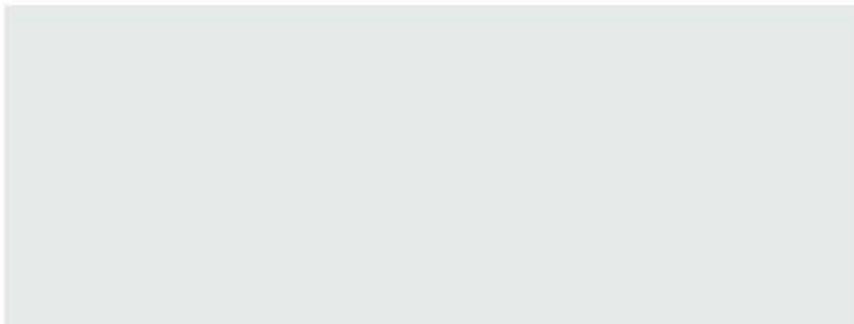
Ageing brings changes in sexual response and sexual health, but exploring other types of intimacy, apart from intercourse, can also be very satisfying

Kanwaljit Soin

I wrote a column last month where I gave some advice on how to live a long and healthy life and, half-jokingly, I recommended that having sex is an ingredient for longevity.

This raised the interest of many readers and I was asked to expand on the subject. This is my response to some of the queries.

Whenever the subject of sex comes up, we must also think of sexuality. Sex usually refers to the physical act of intercourse, but sexuality has a much broader meaning and encompasses social and mental aspects.



Sexuality includes our sexual experiences, thoughts, ideas and fantasies. It is about understanding the sexual feelings and attractions we feel towards others, not who we happen to have sex with. Sexuality is an important component of the quality of life as it undergirds the emotional and physical intimacy that men and women experience throughout their lifespan.

A 2015 study into the sex lives of elderly Australians by dating platform EliteSingles Australia found that many people in their eighth decade are still pretty sexually active or at least thinking about sex. A total of 93 per cent said sex was important in a relationship and 37 per cent said they would not stay in a sexless relationship.

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Sex life and intimacy do not have to suffer because we are getting older, but we may have to accept some changes in sexual response and sexual health and make the necessary adjustments. In both women and men, there are some physiological changes due to ageing that can affect sexual response and there may also be some age-related pathological conditions that may affect sexual health.



ST ILLUSTRATION : MANNY FRANCISCO

In post-menopausal women, the vagina becomes shorter, narrower, and less lubricated. These changes may make sex a little uncomfortable and less pleasurable. Some older women may develop breast cancer and sometimes that necessitates mastectomy, which may make them feel less desirable.

In older men, there is the possibility of becoming impotent or some may have problems of erection. Erectile dysfunction (ED) denotes the loss of ability to get or maintain an erection. By age 65, about 15 to 25 per cent of men have this problem at least one out of every four times they are having sex. This may happen in men with heart disease, high blood pressure or diabetes, because of the disease or the medicines used to treat it.

Prostatectomy may cause impotence and urinary

incontinence.

In women and men, conditions like arthritis, osteoporosis, back pain and other musculo-skeletal conditions can create challenges for love making. Health problems that create difficulty and cause stress in older adults should be discussed with one's doctor and solutions should be found. There are various therapeutic options available to achieve maximum sexual enjoyment and capacity in old age.

The need for intimacy is ageless and timeless. But intercourse is only one way of having a fulfilling sex life. Other types of intimacy and sensual touch can also be very satisfying.

Outercourse is a term used for the great variety of erotic experiences that do not include intercourse or penetrative sex.

**As we get older, things slow down, but it does not matter as we have more time on our hands.**

AN OLDER WOMAN, on sex at age 70 or 80



write about that."

Erica Jong, an American who wrote the well-known book *Fear Of Flying*, went on to write about sex and old age in her book, *Fear Of Dying*. Her explanation for writing this book was: "Actually, I thought it was essential to do it, because sex follows us throughout our lives. The need for touch, the need for connection, that never goes away. But the forms of it change. As people age, touch is more important, erections are less important. And I think somebody needs to

In general, it is possible to have a healthy, active sex life as we get older. It is important to look after oneself, eat a balanced diet, do regular exercise, reduce stress and keep being romantic.

It is useful to remember that too much alcohol can cause erection problems in men and delay orgasm in women.

At any age, emotional issues can also affect our sexuality. However, communication is the key. Intimacy and connection can be maintained with our partner by sharing our fears and desires.

An interesting recent development in Japan is a flourishing niche market in "silver porn".

Adult movies make about US\$20 billion (S\$27 billion) a year and those featuring "unashamedly wrinkly men and women" account for about 20 to 30 per cent of that market in



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a country where 25 per cent of the population are over 65.

According to movie director Fumiaki Kimura, "Elderly porn has become very popular over the past 10 years or so. Older couples watch together because they can feel a connection, a sense of closeness or familiarity, being the same age."

Of course, sex at 70 or 80 is not the same as at 20 or 30, but can be completely satisfying. As one older woman put it succinctly, "As we get older, things slow down, but it does not matter as we have more time on our hands."

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on May 06, 2019, with the headline 'Sex, sexuality and seniors'. [Print Edition](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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