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RELATIONSHIPS

After 50: Do ya think I'm sexy?

Southwest Floridians over 50 are likely to experience changes in their lifestyles, relationships and libido. How do they handle their love lives? Experts tell.

By Dayna Harpster
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If desire is a streetcar, plenty of adults over 50 find it has passed their stop. And they may be waving to their partners, who are still along for the ride several blocks away. "Discrepant desire" may be the most common sexual complaint among older adults who are in relationships or want to be, according to both local and national experts. Call it low libido, lack of desire, not interested, "I have a headache."

The reasons are legion.

Although lack of interest certainly is not the only sexual boggle for the over-50 population, it burns a wide path through the lives of married and single people alike. And they have plenty of questions.

What follows are some of the issues that cause older adults to seek help and some answers we found to help keep you living a full and rewarding life. In a future edition, we'll take on other questions you have (see accompanying box).

See SEXY » D10

So You're Single
Dating, sex and intimacy in a new era

43%
are not happy with their sex life.

Are you one of the 43 percent? Therapy and bravery can lead to solutions.

The Scintillating Spark
Keeping the passion alive - well after 50

The New Normal
Once a week, twice a week ...



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A DANGEROUS TREND
CAN YOU GUESS THE PERCENTAGE OF ADULTS 45-65 WITH STDs?

QUESTIONS

» Do you have a question or an issue about sex or intimacy? We'll pass it along to an expert and try to get it answered. Contact reporter Dayna Harpster at dharpster@news-press.com.

Sexy

Continued from D1

Variable interest

Low desire can affect anyone who is sexually active, but tends to be more common among the older population, said local sex and relationship therapist Peg Walsh, a clinical nurse specialist and advanced practice registered nurse who sees individuals and couples in private practice and also in the Fort Myers office of Dr. Steven Machlin.

A range of conditions can thwart libido. And if the illnesses themselves don't put the sufferer on the sexual sidelines, then the medications to treat them might.

Plenty of seniors are benched by drugs to treat blood pressure, depression, high cholesterol, cancer and other ailments. "When one member of a couple has a serious health challenge, they may misinterpret each other's behavior if they aren't communicating," Walsh said.

That can happen the first time a couple connects after major surgery, chemotherapy or illness. If that doesn't go well, they may withdraw for fear of hurting or disappointing the other. Although things are different, they can find a "new normal," even if it's not like it was before.

And don't discount the power of everyday problems like knee pain to set you back, said Pepper Schwartz, sex and relationships columnist for AARP magazine.

Sometimes lowered desire is not a problem, however. Relationship counselor Linda Morrison, who sees patients in Cape Coral and Punta Gorda, has learned that plenty more couples than most people think are satisfied with sex lives that don't progress to actual intercourse.

"Sometimes people who want the closeness and cuddling are OK with just that amount," she said. "Mostly, people are all looking for companionship, closeness and touch."

Something to talk about

If you're among an estimated 43 percent of adults over 50 who are not satisfied with their sex lives, there are solutions. Sessions with a relationship therapist may be an option. Although usually not covered by insurance, it's an investment many couples are willing to make.

Rates range from \$120 an hour up. Relationship therapists in Southwest Florida can be found through Psychology Today at psychologytoday.com.

"First, someone has to be brave and say 'I'm unhappy and I want this,'" Schwartz said. "They have to let the other person know how serious it is. They may have to draw a line in the sand. But I wouldn't make threats that you won't meet."

Passion finder

Many people lament a lack of passion after years in a long-term relationship. In a way, it's natural for that kind of change to occur.

"People want safety, comfort and familiarity," Walsh said. It's one of the benefits of longtime companionship. But on the other hand, "the unpredictable and different are what make sex more exciting," Walsh suggests that partners looking for more sparks alternate planning dates for each other, injecting an element of surprise. Tell your partner you're going away overnight and suggest what to pack, for example, but keep the destination to yourself.

Dates don't need to be extensive or expensive, either. Setting a mood with music and candles at home can work, too. And there's something to be said for anticipation, both for the partner doing the planning as well as the one being planned for.

Let's get physical

When the first drug

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- » **AARP sex survey:** aarp.org/relationships/love-sex/info-05-2010/srr_09.html
- » **Eros-CTD:** eros-therapy.com
- » **The Female Sexual Functioning Questionnaire:** fsfquestionnaire.com



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for erectile dysfunction, Viagra, hit the market in February 1998, 36,000 prescriptions were written in the first week, according to a report in *The Los Angeles Times* that year. Pfizer's medication was followed by three others: Cialis, Levitra and Staxyn. Estimated revenues from the sale of Viagra in 2012 were expected to reach more than \$63 billion.

Those medications certainly can restore a couple's sex life, but not if the partner isn't included early on, Walsh said.

"Couples who haven't had sex in a while or have had difficulty need to adjust to the new potency," she said. "The woman's response to the change should not be taken for granted and the change in the relationship should not be assumed to be an easy shift. The medications are usually effective but the relationship may need attention."

Vaginal dryness is often an issue with women over 50, said Dr. Anita Del Bianco, a gynecologist with Physicians' Primary Care in Fort Myers and Lehigh Acres. "Technically termed atrophic vaginitis, it is usually apparent on physical examination and can be treated with vaginal estrogen cream.

Stress, hormonal and lifestyle factors can also dampen the female ardor, Del Bianco said.

"I make sure we discuss those issues and ask about the home situation, about work, and eliminate as many stressors as possible," she said. "I make sure there are no unhealthy habits, such as smoking, or drinking excessively, which can interfere with libido, as well."

Dr. Rabia Khan, a geriatric physician who works for Lee Memorial Health System, said that men with low libido may be lacking testosterone—although boosting that level isn't always the solution. Increasing testosterone can cause the prostate to enlarge or exacerbate cardiovascular disease.

Smoking, drinking and lack of exercise also can interfere with male sex drive, Khan said.

Levels of activity

Once a week, twice a week, sometimes, never? How much sex is going on out there?

According to an AARP survey in 2009, 28 per-

cent of adults 45 and older said they were having sex at least once a week. That included 36 percent of married respondents and nearly 50 percent of those who said they were single but dating or engaged. A total of 1,487 people were surveyed nationally in August and September 2009. The resulting report was called "Sex, Romance and Relationships."

The report showed that men are more likely to admit to having sex outside a relationship (21 percent of men vs. 11 percent of women).

Sometimes men are outnumbered as much as 10 to 1 in a senior community or assisted living facility, Khan said. She counsels them that if they're not going to be monogamous they should be sure to use protection. Sexually transmitted diseases are a risk, because "these men can be very busy," she said.

Sex and singlehood

In the 2009 AARP survey, the percentage of respondents who thought sex should only occur within a marriage was just 22 percent, compared with 41 percent 10 years earlier.

Perhaps that is one reason that the rates of sexually transmitted disease among adults 45 to 65 tripled between 2000 and 2010, according to numbers from the Centers for Disease Control.

Most alarmingly, HIV rates continue to rise among adults 50 and older, due to new infections (as of 2005, 15 percent of new cases occurred in adults over 50) and also the success of antiretroviral treatments.

And while an unanticipated need for protection may trip up a newly single senior, for most it's merely a wrinkle.

Seniors 55 and older have constituted the fastest-growing group of subscribers to online dating sites during the past five years, according to a 2011 story in USA Today that cites Online Dating Magazine. This age group now represents 16.7 percent of all traffic to online dating sites.

In fact, Peg Walsh, 63, and her husband, Karl, 73, a retired butcher, met several years ago through match.com.

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