



**Promoting sexual health in older adults:
integrated summary
of findings**



Summary Briefing

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Document overview

This document provides a summary of evidence from two projects commissioned to explore sexual health promotion in older people. The complete methods and findings for each project are provided in the following reports, which are available on request:

Stowell et al., (2022). Promoting sexual health in older adults: findings from two rapid reviews. NIHR Older People & Frailty Policy Research Unit.

Wellings et al., (2022). Promoting sexual health in older adults: findings from stakeholder and public involvement consultations. NIHR Public Health Policy Research Unit.

Context

We aimed to provide an overview of what is known about sexual health needs and sexual health promotion in later life. This offers a key opportunity to support and inform sexual and reproductive health policy development relating to older people's sexual health.

Methods

To address the aims of this work, we:

- Summarised evidence about older people's sexual health needs and interventions to support these needs in two rapid reviews;
- Sought the views of key experts in the fields of ageing and sexual health in two stakeholder events;
- Sought the views of older people in a patient and public involvement exercise.

A detailed account of the methods and findings for each component is available in two full-length reports.

Findings

Considerations about sexual health in later life

Sexuality can be an important part of healthy ageing. Yet age-related factors may hinder older people's sexual health and wellbeing. These factors include the impact of long-term conditions, spousal caring, losing a partner, and living in a care home. Social norms of penetrative sex may be unhelpful and off-putting for some older people. Older groups may prefer a definition of sex that includes alternative forms of sexual expression and physical intimacy.

Older people are not a homogenous group: needs, vulnerabilities and levels of risk will vary. Further diversity of sexual health needs will arise from different sexual, gender and ethnic identities within older populations. Challenging assumptions of sexual inactivity among older people is important. Equally, new policy directions should also acknowledge that some older people are sexually inactive either by choice or circumstance.

Seeking help for sexual health

Older people worry that their sexual health problems will be dismissed as a normal part of ageing. This makes it difficult for older people to get the help they need. Societal assumptions of later life asexuality can also undermine older people's confidence to discuss their concerns.

Stigma and taboo about being sexually active may further deter older people from seeking help. This may be exacerbated by the poor visibility of older people in sexual health promotion materials. Older people may be put off from using sexual health services because they think these services are geared towards younger people.

Promoting awareness and understanding of sexual health

Knowledge of sexual health and safe practices may be limited in older populations. More information is needed to support older people's understanding of: the risk of sexually transmitted infection; the potential for a HIV diagnosis later in life; and, the impact of long-term conditions on sexual health. Promoting awareness of sexual health for older people could be achieved through: 'edutainment', the fusing of fictional story lines with public health messaging; and, greater visual representation of older people in health promotion materials.

Tailored support

Diverse needs require tailored approaches to support older people's sexual health. Talking about sex can be difficult for older people. Opportunities to discuss sexual health in routine care would be welcome, but permission is needed. Older people may prefer these discussions to be initiated by healthcare professionals, and most importantly, someone they trust.

Long-term conditions and sexual health

Long-term health conditions, and the medications used to manage them, can impact on older people's sexual functioning and wellbeing. Older people with long-term conditions are therefore likely to have unique sexual health needs. Addressing these needs could benefit the overall health and wellbeing of older people with long-term health conditions. Both primary care and specialist care offer key windows of opportunity to discuss the impact of long-term conditions on older people's sexual health.

Older people and HIV

HIV care for older people must be efficient and equitable, underpinned by timely diagnosis. The presence of linked health issues requires a holistic approach to HIV care that addresses both physical and mental aspects of health.

Some evidence suggests that behavioural and educational interventions can improve HIV-related knowledge and practices for older people. However, evidence about the long-term sustainability of these benefits is unclear.

Support for sexual health linked to the menopause

Sexual health needs linked to the menopause require greater consideration in care. Menopause services are currently fragmented and could be streamlined.

A number of interventions were identified that aimed to support the sexual health of women with symptoms of the menopause. However, it was unclear whether these interventions improved sexual health outcomes.

Training for care professionals

Training for health and social care professionals is vital to support the sexual health of older people. Professionals may benefit from training that aims to increase their knowledge of later life sexuality, as well as their confidence in initiating and having discussions with older people about sex. Supporting staff education on these topics may help to combat ageism and other forms of discrimination that deter older people from seeking help. Training could be supported by professional organisations, and made available for a range of professionals across health settings (e.g. primary and secondary care) and social care settings (e.g. care homes).

Some evidence suggests that formalised training interventions can improve the knowledge and attitudes of care home staff when supporting older people's sexual health. However, more evidence is needed about the longer-term benefits of these approaches.

Implications for policy

Policy efforts to address sexual health could implement a life course approach. Sexual health in later life presents unique needs, many of which may be exacerbated by age-related issues. Diverse experiences require tailored and inclusive approaches. Recognition of the choice of sexual inactivity in later life is equally important.

Consideration of sexual health promotion for older people must span wide-ranging populations and needs: sexually transmitted infections including but not limited to HIV; sexual wellbeing linked to, and independent of, long-term conditions and/or the menopause; and older people in the community and care home settings.

To support sexual health policy in the UK, future research could explore the impact of interventions that are under-represented in current evidence. A greater focus on the sexual health needs of older people with long-term conditions, from ethnic minorities, and who identify as LGBTQ+, would also enhance what is known on these issues.

This document is available in large print.

Please contact the NIHR Older People and Frailty PRU for assistance.

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