

One-Third of Seniors Have Sex Once a Week

BY TIMOTHY F. KIRN
Sacramento Bureau

SEATTLE — Sex remains an important part of life for seniors, with almost one-third of persons between the ages of 65 and 74 years continuing to have sex at least once a week, according to a survey of sexual behavior in seniors.

"We hope that population-representative data on sexual activity will help older people view their sexual experience relative to that of others and that these data also will provide physicians with a reference," said Dr. Stacy Lindau of the geriatric section of the department of medicine at the University of Chicago.

The survey of 3,005 older individuals found that 73% of those interviewed had a spouse or a significant, intimate other, and that of those, 73% were sexually active, which was defined as having had at least one sex partner in the previous 12 months.

The percentage of 75- to 85-year-olds who reported having sex once a week or more was similar to the percentage reported by 18- to 59-year-olds in another survey.

Only one-quarter of the respondents said sex was not important to them at all.

Very few of the respondents reported more than one partner in the previous 12 months, and almost all of the sexual encounters were heterosexual, Dr. Lindau said.

The subjects of the survey were chosen to be demographically representative of the population as a whole. They were divided equally between men and women, with roughly 1,000 subjects in each of three age groups, 57-64 years, 65-74 years, and 75-85 years. The 120-minute survey was conducted in person.

Among 57- to 64-year-olds, 40% of men and 34% of women reported having sex once a week or more, and 33% of men and 37% of women reported having sex less than once a month. Among 65- to 74-year-olds, 31% of both men and women said they had sex once a week or more and 35% of both men and women said they had sex less than once a month.

In the oldest group, 75- to 85-year-olds, 23% of men and 24% of women reported having sex once a week or more, and 47% of men and 46% of women reported having sex less than once a month. Overall, the percentage of this group who reported having sex once a week or more is similar to the percentage reported in a survey of participants aged 18-59 years, Dr. Lindau noted.

However, sexual problems among the respondents were common. Among those who reported being sexually active, 62% of the men and 70% of the women reported one or more sexual problems in the previous year. And of those reporting a problem, 26% of the men and 31% of the women said they avoided sex as a result.

Most of those who reported a sexual problem described it as "bothersome," an

important point because to make a clinical diagnosis of sexual dysfunction, the individual needs not only to have a problem but also to be personally bothered by it as well, said Dr. Lindau.

Among the problems, a lack of interest was noted by 24% of the men and 44% of the women in the youngest age group, and by 24% of the men and 49% of the women in the oldest age group, numbers that, according to Dr. Landau, "are not too different from the younger population."

With regard to medical care, 28% of the respondents said they had spoken to their physicians about sex since they had turned 50, and generally that was because the physician had broached the subject. Of those with a sexual problem, only 48% of the men and 34% of the women had ever discussed it with their physician.

Among the sexually active respondents, about half of those in the two lower age groups reported engaging in oral sex, as well as sexual intercourse, as did about

25% of those in the oldest age group. There was no significant difference in the percentages between men and women.

About half of the men and one-quarter of the women in the youngest age group reported having masturbated in the previous year, and the percentages reporting masturbation dropped in the oldest age group to 26% of men and 18% of women.

Three percent of the men and 5% of the women reported ever having had a same-sex sexual experience. ■

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