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Sexual Satisfaction Tied to Overall “Successful Aging” as Reported by Women Age 60 to 89

A study by researchers at the Stein Institute for Research on Aging at the University of California, San Diego finds that successful aging and positive quality of life indicators correlate with sexual satisfaction in older women. The report, published online in the August edition of the *Journal of the American Geriatric Society*, also shows that self-rated successful aging, quality of life and sexual satisfaction appear to be stable even in the face of declines in physical health of women between the ages of 60 and 89.

The study looked at 1,235 women enrolled at the San Diego site of the Women’s Health Initiative (WHI) study, a major ongoing research program funded by the National Institutes of Health which, since 1993, has addressed causes of death, disability and quality of life in more than 160,000 generally healthy, post-menopausal women.

As the researchers expected, sexual activity and functioning (such things as desire, arousal and ability to climax) were negatively associated with age, as were physical and mental health. However, in contrast to sexual activity and functioning, satisfaction with overall sex life was not significantly different between the three age cohorts studied: age 60 to 69; 70 to 79; and 80 to 89.

Approximately 67 percent, 60 percent, and 61 percent of women in these three age groups, respectively, reported that they were “moderately” to “very satisfied” with their sex lives.

“Contrary to our earlier hypothesis, sexual satisfaction was not significantly associated with age,” said Wesley K. Thompson, PhD, assistant professor of psychiatry with the Stein Institute for Research on Aging at the UC San Diego School of Medicine, and co-lead author along with UC San Diego medical student Lindsey Charo, BA. “Although the levels of sexual activity and functioning did vary significantly, depending on the woman’s age, their perceived quality of life, successful aging and sexual satisfaction remained positive.”

Sexual activity was significantly lower in older age cohorts. Of the women who were married or in an intimate relationship, 70 percent of those aged 60 to 69, 57 percent of those aged 70 to 79, and 31 percent of those aged 80 to 89 reported having had some sexual activity in the

previous six months. While women who were married or living in an intimate relationship engaged in higher rates of sexual activity than those who were not in such a relationship, sexual activity still decreased across age cohorts.

The findings of this study confirm earlier published research from the UCSD Stein Institute suggesting that self-rated health changes little with age even when objective health indicators show age-associated decline.

“What this study tells us is that many older adults retain their ability to enjoy sex well into old age,” said Thompson. “This is especially true of older adults who maintain a higher level of physical and mental health as they grow older. Furthermore, feeling satisfied with your sex life - whatever your levels of sexual activity - is closely related to your perceived quality of life.” He added that “while we cannot assess cause and effect from this study, these results suggest that maintaining a high level of sexual satisfaction may positively reinforce other psychological aspects of successful aging.”

Additional contributors to the study include Ipsit V. Vahia, MD, Colin Depp, PhD, Matthew Allison, MD, and Dilip V. Jeste, MD, all with the UCSD School of Medicine.

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