

## Menopause and Women's Sexuality: New Perspectives from the Best Study to Date

By Michael Castleman

Here's the conventional wisdom on sex and menopause:

- During and after menopause, most women's libidos decline (though this may sometimes be reversed using androgen hormone replacement).
- Most older women experience vaginal dryness (though this may be minimized using a sexual lubricant)
- Most older women's frequency of intercourse declines in part because of reduced libido, and in part because of partner loss or sex problems on the part of partners.

### The Largest Study Ever

These findings are the consensus results of quite a few studies. But most of them involves small numbers of women, and they cross-sectional, meaning that they asked menopausal women: What is your sexuality *right now*? Small trials can provide valuable insights. But they are not as authoritative as large studies. There's strength in numbers. Cross-sectional trials can also provide important information. But they are not as authoritative as studies that follow people over time, ideally many years—prospective trials.

In 2002, Australian researchers published results of the world's largest, longest-duration prospective study ever on the sexual effects of menopause. To some extent, it confirms the conventional wisdom. But it adds important new perspective, largely because it compares how women feel early in the process of menopause (age 45 to 50) and years later.

The Melbourne Women's Midlife Health Project (MWMHP) study involves 2,001 randomly selected Australian women who enrolled when they were 45 to 55 and

were followed for at least 11 years. The women were interviewed extensively at enrollment, and have been re-interviewed many times since.

The menopausal sexuality study reports on 438 women. Most (224) had natural menopause. Some (37) had surgical menopause—removal of their ovaries, usually during hysterectomy. And some (91) had taken hormone replacement therapy. These figures are roughly equivalent to American women's experiences of menopause.

### **The Sexual Stages of Menopause**

Year-to-year, two-thirds of the women reported no change in sexual functioning or desire, but one-third reported declines. Over time, declining sexual interest and activity affected virtually all the women.

However, the largest declines occurred during the early years of the menopausal transition. Declines from baseline to early menopause were much greater than declines from early to later menopause. In other words, menopause does not appear to produce an unrelenting downward spiral in women's sexual interest and frequency. In most women, it declines during the decade of the fifties, but later, the rate of decline slows considerably.

Vaginal dryness also increases from baseline through early menopause and through late menopause. Dryness can feel uncomfortable, but for most women, it need not become a sexually limiting problem, thanks to sexual lubricants.

### **The Changing Emotional Lives of Menopausal Women**

The biggest surprises in the MWMHP concern women's feelings for their partners and their assessment of their own sexual responsiveness. During early menopause, women report more problems with their lovers and more negative feelings about them. But by later menopause, feelings for partners have returned to baseline. It appears that the early transition into menopause is emotionally difficult for women—and the men in their lives—which causes friction and resentments. But as the years pass, couples accommodate to menopausal changes and most women feel renewed love and affection for their partners.

### **In Late Menopause, Sexual Responsiveness May Increase**

Something similar happens to women's feelings about their own sexual responsiveness. From baseline to early menopause, the women in the MWMHP

reported a precipitous drop in responsiveness. But as the years passed, responsiveness improves. By late menopause, the women said their sexual responsiveness was almost back to baseline.

Menopause is an intensely personal transition. Every woman passes through it in her own way. But the MWMHP provides reassurance for those women and couples who hope to remain active lovers for life. Yes, menopausal women experience vaginal dryness and a decline in libido and sexual frequency, so the MWMHP confirms the conventional wisdom. But this study, the largest and most authoritative to date, also shows that women's sexuality does not shrivel up and disappear during menopause. In fact, women with partners tend to remain interested in sex and sexually active, albeit at lower levels than when they were younger. And during later menopause, women's feelings of love and warmth for their partners tends to increase along with their sexual responsiveness.

To be sure, menopause is a sexually mixed bag. But for couples who can adjust to reduced sexual frequency without major resentments, sex in later life is increasingly tender, and women remain sexually responsive—in fact, from early to late menopause, this study shows that responsiveness improves.

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