

Navigating the gray area of sex

If you think having "the talk" with your kids is tough, consider this: With increasing rates of HIV and other STDs in older adults, you might want to discuss safe sex with your parents, too.

By [Gail Rosenblum](#), Star Tribune

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When Kari Berit's father was widowed in his early 60s, he relied heavily on Berit, his "angel," to help him through his darkest hours. But eventually, Berit's dad seemed lighter, giddy even. Berit soon learned why in a conversation that went something like this:

"Kari, I've asked a woman out." "Omigosh, really?" "I want you to meet her." "You do? Why?"

To Berit's relief, he told her that the relationship was enjoyable, and platonic. "I was like ... 'Phewwwwww.' So, I don't have to have "the talk" with you, Dad?"

He eventually married another woman. But the experience taught Berit, 43, a Red Wing educator on older-adult issues and author of "The Unexpected Caregiver," that even she harbored myths about the population she served. "I was focused on the 'elephant' issues: driving, going to the doctor, money scams, depression, physical cleanliness," she said. "Sex? Give me a break."

She knows better now. Sex? Yes.

A study published in the New England Journal of Medicine in August backs her up. Interviews with more than 3,000 men and women, ages 57 to 85, revealed that most enjoyed active sex lives at least into their early 70s. Most reported having sex at least two to three times a month, about the same as what national surveys have found for people ages 18 to 59.

And while sexual activity declines with age, the authors reported that "a substantial number of men and women" engage in sex even in their eighth and ninth decades of life.

That's good news to Brian Zamboni, a psychologist who specializes in sex therapy at the University of Minnesota. He says a healthy sex life can fulfill the human hunger for touch, improve one's quality of life and aid overall physiological functioning.

"The Unexpected Caregiver: How Boomers Can Keep Mom and Dad Active, Safe and Independent," Kari Berit, Attainment, \$19. www.kariberit.com

"The Complete Idiot's Guide to Amazing Sex," Sari Locker, Alpha Books, \$20. Includes a chapter on sex and aging.

www.moappp.org/outreach/lets_talk_month.html.

October is "Let's Talk Month," a national campaign encouraging open and honest dialogue about sexuality between parents and their children. May spur ideas for those who want to have a similar talk with their aging parents.

Center for Sexual Health, University of Minnesota, www.med.umn.edu/fm/phs/home.html or 612-625-1500.

Delphi Health Products,

www.delphihealthproducts.com. Intergenerational products that preserve memories and encourage conversations.

"Sex is an amazing and beautiful part of the human condition, and the fact that we can enjoy it well into our 90s is reassuring," Zamboni said.

But dangers lurk for those reinvigorated by new relationships in the age of casual sex and Cialis: People ages 50 to 64 accounted for 14 percent of new HIV diagnoses nationwide in 2005, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Herpes, chlamydia, and human papillomavirus, which is linked to cervical cancer, also are showing up in older populations.

Avoiding the talk

So, yes, a talk is in order. But talking about safe sex with Mom or Dad is the last thing many adult children want to do. Most health professionals don't want to do it, either, said Zamboni. Some find it awkward or make the ageist assumption that such a talk is unnecessary. By not asking about sexual problems, doctors and others can miss warning signs of diabetes, hypertension or far worse health concerns.

An Ohio University study, for example, found that doctors have misdiagnosed early symptoms of HIV infection, such as fatigue, weakness and memory changes, as normal signs of aging. The Ohio study also reported that 27 percent of HIV-infected men and 35 percent of HIV-infected women over 50 sometimes have sex without using condoms.

But doctors or grown children who do bring up safe sex might be laughed at -- "You know I can't get pregnant!" -- or shut down.

Those working with elderly populations say it's important to keep talking. Instead of jumping in with a list of dos and don'ts, it might be best to first understand and appreciate where your parent is coming from.

"If you suddenly say, 'Don't do this! You might get an STD!' [your parent] may wonder who you are to give them instructions when they've lived this long," said Debby Bitticks, 62, an intergenerational expert in Los Angeles and CEO of Delphi Health Products, directed at the boomer market.

Better, she said: Try to understand the world in which your parents were raised. A parent widowed after 40 years, for example, might have only experienced sex with one person in an age when the biggest concern was getting pregnant before marriage. This information gives you an opening, Bitticks said, to educate without lecturing.

"You can say, 'You know, Mom, you wanted me safe. I want you safe. But I've got to tell you, today, it's not about pregnancy. I want you to have fun without any of these worries.'"

Do talk about increasing STD rates and the importance of wearing a condom. Awkward? Yes, Bitticks said, but genuine concern on the child's part can make it "a little less awkward."

Sometimes, she added, another sibling who is closer to your parent might have more success with this conversation. And if none of the siblings wants to do it, consider a close friend, religious leader or doctor (but be clear to the doctor what you need him or her to discuss).

Changed sexual times

Health isn't the only concern. Many people returning to dating might feel intimidated by how much has changed, from online dating, to friends "with benefits," to sex toys going mainstream.

"Often, sexual expectations are higher," said Sari Locker, a psychologist and author of "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Amazing Sex." "Almost every aspect of sex has been discussed in pop culture. Even if your newly single mom or dad hasn't watched 'Sex and the City,' chances are the person they're dating has. Their partner may have heard about or thought about sex toys. Also, they may need to learn how to use condoms all over again."

Not surprisingly, she said, many begin dating "with great trepidation." It's important to note that many elderly people might not want to have sex without being married, and that's OK, too.

A calm, nonjudgmental approach is best. Ask your parent what he or she is looking for in a relationship -- friendship? romance? -- and how to make those desires known to potential partners. A dose of levity wouldn't hurt. You might share your own forays into dating, whether you're doing it now or can remember your own awkward dates and funniest experiences.

Mostly, though, be encouraging about your parents' need, and right, to have a sexual, or sensual life, if they choose it. "It's wonderful to remind your parent that they don't need to do anything special sexually," Locker said. "They can just be themselves and it will come back to them naturally."

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