

# Sexual Health Week 2010

## 13–19 September



## The Middle-age Spread (STIs in the over 50s)

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are on the increase in people over the age of 50 with evidence that they are rising faster than in younger people. Older people are increasingly likely to be single or experiencing relationship changes. Nowadays there is more opportunity to meet new people through international travel and internet dating. Treatments for menopausal symptoms and erectile difficulties mean that older people can continue to have a sexual life if they wish to do so.

Society still sees sexual activity among older people as taboo and this attitude makes older people ashamed or embarrassed to admit to being sexual adults. There is also a perception that sexual problems are part of 'normal ageing' and that they will not be taken seriously when seeking help and advice.

Sex is not only about reproduction. Apart from sexual pleasure, there are many physical and emotional benefits in having an active sex life in older age. It's a good form of exercise, reduces stress, aids relaxation and sleep, is a good pain reliever, and keeps the prostate gland and genitals healthy – there is even a suggestion that it can help people live longer.

### What are the challenges/barriers for healthcare providers?

- Older people may have poor knowledge of sexual health issues.
- They may not recognise that they are/have been at risk of a sexually transmitted infection.
- Sexual health messages and campaigns are not aimed at this age group.
- Older people are perceived to be less sexually active therefore less at risk.
- Services and information tend to focus on younger people.
- The signs and symptoms of some sexually transmitted infections may be mistaken as a 'normal' part of ageing for example, vaginal soreness and irregular bleeding.
- Older people are less likely to be consistent or confident condom users as campaigns urging safer sex are targeted at younger people.

### What are the challenges/barriers for older people?

- Contraception is no longer a necessity so they may not consider the need for using a condom.
- They do not know where to go for confidential, non-judgemental advice and information.
- They may lack experience around condom use and negotiation especially if they have previously been in a long-term relationship.
- Older people may not know how sexually transmitted infections are transmitted and in particular how they are transmitted during non-penetrative sex.
- They may misunderstand the risks or they may be unable to relate the issues to their personal circumstances.
- If their knowledge is lacking they may have difficulty finding the words to talk about their sexual life, problems or worries.

## How can you engage with older people to promote positive sexual health messages?

- Display information about confidentiality in a public area of the clinic.
- Display sexual health information in areas where other health literature is displayed.
- Make services 'older people friendly' – use posters and leaflets that represent them.
- Advertise your services clearly, making sure older people know who they can approach for advice and/or information.
- Advertise local sexual health services, display numbers for sexual health helplines and promote useful websites.
- Explore sexual health issues opportunistically, for example at cervical screening tests, menopause clinics and during routine health checks.
- Ensure staff are aware of the issues and are appropriately trained, updated and resourced to provide non-judgemental advice and information.

### Key points

- Health professionals may need to be more proactive in raising sexual health issues in consultations if the sexual health needs of older people are to be met.
- Services should be based on the needs of diverse local populations.
- There needs to be a holistic and person-centred approach to sexual health which is inclusive of older people.

### Further information

#### How FPA can help you

Call **sexual health direct**, the helpline run by FPA. It provides:

- confidential information and advice and a wide range of booklets on common sexually transmitted infections
- details of sexual health and GUM clinics and sexual assault referral centres.

#### FPA helplines

##### England

helpline 0845 122 8690

9am to 6pm Monday to Friday

##### Northern Ireland

helpline 0845 122 8687

9am to 5pm Monday to Friday

Visit [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk) for confidential information and advice or send your enquiry to Ask WES, the FPA Web Enquiry Service.

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