

Ageism and mistaken beliefs complicate acceptance of older adults' sexuality, finds study

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More than 25% of the young adults surveyed in a recent study mistakenly believed that sexual activity increases older adults' risk of heart attack and that disinterest in sex is a normal and inevitable part of aging. While most of those in the study had permissive views about sexual activity in later life, the findings also shed light on the misconceptions and ageist views that can infringe on older adults' rights to sexual expression.

More than 270 [young adults](#) ages 18-35 participated in the study, which assessed their level of knowledge about sexuality in older adulthood, their general attitudes toward sex and their perceptions of it as a leisure activity that offers numerous benefits and purposes beyond procreation.

Published in the journal *Leisure Sciences*, [the study](#) was conducted by researchers Liza Berdychevsky, a professor of recreation, sport and tourism at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and Iulia Fratila, a professor of global and [community health](#) at George Mason University.

Those surveyed had only a moderate level of knowledge about sexuality in later life. However, their permissive attitudes contrasted with some prior studies that found that [younger people](#)—especially women—tended to hold negative, narrow-minded beliefs about sex among [older adults](#), Berdychevsky and Fratila found.

"Our findings suggest that young adults tend to exhibit increasing levels of tolerance, acceptance and open-mindedness about later-life sexuality," said Fratila, who earned her doctorate from the U. of I. in 2022.

"How much young adults know about later-life sexuality does not necessarily explain their ageist perceptions," Berdychevsky said. "And sociodemographic characteristics such as gender did not matter either, to our surprise."

"However, their general views of sexuality and sex as a recreational activity do explain quite a lot about young adults' views on sexuality in later life. That is particularly important because it provides insight for developing [sexual health](#) education programs that focus on sexuality as a lifelong pursuit."

Liberal attitudes about sexuality in general and among older adults in particular were associated with a strong view of sex as a leisure activity among the young adults surveyed. Prominent organizations such as the World Health Organization and the World Association for Sexual Health have adopted this perspective, highlighting the leisure qualities of sex, including sexual pleasure, autonomy, self-determination and sexual rights for all.

Berdychevsky had found in her [prior research](#) that leisurely characteristics such as playfulness, experimentation, connection, [intrinsic motivation](#) and instant gratification are often adults' motivations for engaging in sexual activity. Likewise, older adults who viewed sex as a recreational activity found it helpful in coping with crises and challenging life transitions such as retirement and empty nest syndrome, according to a [study](#) published in 2018 that Berdychevsky co-wrote with Galit Nimrod, a professor of communication studies at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Both of those studies also were published in *Leisure Sciences*.

Despite ageist societal views that sexuality has an expiration date, studies have shown that most adults continue to have healthy, fulfilling sex lives well into their 80s and 90s. Sexual activity in later life also offers numerous health benefits, including improved cardiovascular function, relaxation, and decreased pain sensitivity and depressive symptoms, researchers found.

Regardless of its numerous physical and psychological benefits, older

adults' sexual rights are especially vulnerable to marginalization and neglect, reflecting societal misconceptions that they are not and should not be sexually active, Berdychevsky said.

Accordingly, some respondents in the current study indicated they would avoid admitting a relative to a nursing home if the facility permitted and supported [sexual activity](#) among its residents.

"There's some research suggesting that young adults tend to have these ageist attitudes toward sexuality because of their own fears of aging and mortality," Berdychevsky said. "It is oxymoronic when you think about it, because if we are lucky, we will have the opportunity to grow old. And who would want their own sexuality to be discriminated against or neglected in later life? Mitigating these ageist stereotypes to leverage [sexuality](#)'s benefits throughout the lifespan will be beneficial for everybody."

More information: Liza Berdychevsky et al, Young Adults' Acceptance of Later-Life Sexuality Is Predicted by Their General Sexual Attitudes and Viewing Sex as Leisure, *Leisure Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/01490400.2023.2273382](https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2023.2273382)

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