



CONVERSATION STARTERS

Talking to Older Adults about Sexual Health:

A Guide for Healthcare Providers

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POSITIVE CHANGE
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WITH HIV AND OTHER
EPISODIC DISABILITIES



INTRODUCTION

Talking to Older Adults about Sexual Health

Research has found that most older adults are still interested in sex.¹ However, they often encounter barriers to accessing the information that they need, including having providers who do not proactively bring up sexual health.^{2,3} This guide is designed to help providers start welcoming, inclusive conversations about sexual health with patients ages 50-plus.



1,2,3. <https://www.realizecanada.org/wp-content/uploads/SHOP-Reference-List.pdf>

Starting the Conversation

Beginning these conversations is often the hardest step. Many older adults grew up in times in which sex was even more stigmatized than it is today and may want to have this conversation but need to be eased into it. While you should not assume from the start that a patient is uncomfortable talking about sexual health, you should consider easing back if they seem startled or offended by a particular topic. Try asking questions like:

- **Many people in your age group want to talk about sexual health with their provider but are nervous about asking. Is that something you'd like to discuss?**
- **Are you currently sexually active – meaning, do you have any type of sex with other people? If not, are you interested in being sexually active?**
- **Before we get into more detail, do you have any particular concerns you want me to address today?**

Utilizing Inclusive Language

Throughout the conversation, it is key to avoid making assumptions about a person's sexual activity, including the gender(s) of their partner(s), the number of their partners, or the types of sexual activity with which they engage. In some cultures, it may be appropriate to directly ask if a person identifies as a sexual minority (gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.) or a gender minority (transgender, non-binary, etc.). Similarly, in some cultures it may be okay to ask directly about how many partners someone might have. Other times, asking open-ended questions can obtain the same information. Try asking things like:

- **Can you tell me about who you typically partner with for sexual activity?**
- **I typically ask all my patients, to be sure, what gender or genders you are attracted to?**
- **Do you have (or are you looking for) more than one partner?**

Utilizing Inclusive Language

Especially if you have a client who is transgender – meaning, they identify as a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth – or nonbinary – meaning they don’t identify strictly as male or female – it is important to use inclusive language talking about bodies. If a client is transgender or nonbinary, you should not make any assumption about the gender(s) of their partner(s) or the type of sexual activity in which they participate.⁴

4. <https://www.realizecanada.org/wp-content/uploads/SHOP-Reference-List.pdf>

Learning About Sexual Behaviors

If you have established that a patient wants to talk about sexual health, either because they are sexually active or are interested in being sexually active, a good next step is to learn more about their specific behaviors. Try asking things like:

- **What type of sexual activities do you participate in?**
- **Penetrative sex is where a penis enters a vagina or anus. Do you have penetrative sex?**
- **Oral sex is using someone's mouth on a penis, vagina, or anus. Do you have oral sex?**
- **There are also lots of other sexual activities including different types of touching another person, touching oneself, and kissing. Do you participate in any of those activities?**

Assessing Barriers and Challenges

Older adults can face many health conditions that present barriers or challenges to their ability to engage in a healthy sex life. Helping patients to identify these and, ideally, find a solution can improve their quality of life. Try asking questions about how conditions may have impacted a patient (directly or by having impacted their partner(s), if applicable), such as:

- **Do you feel that any other health conditions you have, or physical limitations in general, are limiting your sex life?**
- **Has menopause (or hormones to treat it) seemed to have changed your desire for sex, one way or the other?**
- **Over time, things like the shape and lubrication of the vagina can change. Has that impacted you?**

Assessing Barriers and Challenges

- There are many things that can impact the ease of getting and keeping an erection, including aging in general and conditions like diabetes or heart disease. Has that impacted you?
- Mental health and even behaviors like drinking can impact sex, too. Do you think that might be impacting you?
- Did you notice a change in your sex drive or abilities once you started taking a new medication?

Ensuring Consent

Consent is a topic that, in general, was less taught and understood in older generations. Moreover, dementia and cognitive decline among older adults can complicate the idea of informed consent to sexual relations, even among long-standing relationships.⁵ To decide if a fuller evaluation of the ability to consent might be necessary, try asking questions like:

- **When initiating a sexual activity, do you always feel like you want it to happen? Do you continue to want it during the activity? Do you feel like if you changed your mind for some reason, you could easily stop it?**
- **Do you feel, before starting sexual activity, you understand what's happening and you keep that understanding throughout the activity? Do you ever become disoriented or confused while participating?**
- **Do you feel like you have ways of communicating your consent – or that you do not consent – do your partner(s)? Do they understand and respect those signals?**

5. <https://www.realizecanada.org/wp-content/uploads/SHOP-Reference-List.pdf>

Facilitating Safer Sex

HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are increasing among older adults in many parts of the globe.^{6,7,8} Older adults for whom avoiding pregnancy was once a consideration, and no longer is, or who were in a long-term monogamous relationship, and no longer are, may not understand the need to practice safer sex at this stage in life. Try starting conversations with questions like:

- **What do you know about preventing sexually transmitted infections?**
- **Do you do anything to protect yourself during sex?**
- **Do you know about options like (as appropriate) condoms, insertive condoms, dental dams for oral sex, and PrEP for HIV?**
- **Have you been tested for STIs in the past? Do you know what you were tested for, and the results?**
- **Do you know where you can access testing services?**

6,7,8. <https://www.realizecanada.org/wp-content/uploads/SHOP-Reference-List.pdf>

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