Better Together: Finding Support Through Midlife

10/26/2026



Healthy sexual relationships can be an important part of committed partnerships and are associated with both relationship and life satisfaction (Vasconcelos et al., 2024; Whitbourne, 2017). As we age, however, physical and hormonal changes can affect sexual health and intimacy. Understanding what each partner may be experiencing can foster greater empathy and make it easier to communicate openly about sexual health and intimacy.

Midlife Changes in Women's Sexual Health

During midlife, the hormonal changes associated with perimenopause and menopause can affect sexual health in a variety of ways. Declining estrogen levels can contribute to vaginal dryness, irritation, and pain during sexual activity (Metcalfe & Meston, 2026). These hormonal changes may also affect sleep, mood, stress, and overall well-being, which can influence a woman's interest in or desire for physical intimacy (Metcalfe & Meston, 2026).

Although it is not the right approach for everyone, hormone therapy may help manage some menopause-related symptoms (Haver, n.d.; The Menopause Society, n.d.). Estrogen therapy, including localized vaginal estrogen when appropriate, may help address symptoms such as vaginal dryness and discomfort. Nonhormonal options, including vaginal moisturizers and lubricants, can also help reduce dryness and discomfort during sexual activity. Talking with your healthcare provider can help you understand your options and what might be the best option for you.

For women experiencing low sexual desire, lifestyle factors such as regular exercise, a healthy diet, and stress management may support sexual well-being (Haver, n.d.). Addressing psychological and relationship factors, including stress and relationship concerns, may also help improve sexual desire. If low sexual desire persists, testosterone therapy or other nonhormonal prescription medications may be considered in consultation with a qualified healthcare provider (Haver, n.d.).

Couples can navigate these changes together by communicating openly about how each partner is feeling, discussing comfort and needs before and during sexual activity, and being willing to adapt as those needs change. These conversations are not just a one time occurrence, as your partners' needs and preferences may alter as their health changes. When symptoms interfere with comfort, sexual health, or quality of life, talking with a healthcare provider can help identify appropriate treatment options.

Midlife Changes in Men's Sexual Health

Erectile dysfunction (ED), which can include difficulty getting or maintaining an erection, becomes more common as men age (Mayo Clinic, 2022). Some men may also experience a decrease in sexual desire during midlife (Mayo Clinic, 2024). Hormonal changes, physical health, medications, stress, and other factors can all influence sexual function and desire. These experiences can be frustrating or concerning and may affect not only the individual experiencing them but also their partner and relationship.

In some cases, healthy lifestyle habits, such as exercising regularly, limiting alcohol consumption, quitting smoking, managing stress, and seeking support for anxiety or depression, may help prevent or improve erectile dysfunction (Mayo Clinic, 2022). However, ED can also be a sign of an underlying health condition, such as diabetes or heart disease, making it important to talk with a healthcare provider if symptoms persist. Similarly, significant or concerning changes in sexual desire may be worth discussing with a healthcare provider. Addressing these concerns is important, as changes in sexual function or desire may contribute to increased stress, decreased self-confidence, and relationship challenges.

Open communication between partners can help reduce misunderstandings and provide reassurance that changes in sexual function or desire do not necessarily reflect a lack of attraction or affection. Approaching these changes with empathy, patience, and a willingness to adapt or seek

help when needed can help couples maintain intimacy and connection throughout midlife.

Summary

Physical changes can affect a couple's sexual experiences during midlife and beyond, but these changes do not necessarily have to be negative. In fact, sexual intimacy later in life can offer benefits such as increased confidence, stronger communication, and fewer inhibitions (Harvard Health Publishing, 2026). While couples may need to adapt as their bodies, needs, and preferences evolve, these transitions can also provide opportunities to better understand one another, communicate more openly, and explore new ways of maintaining intimacy and connection.

Additional Resources:

How to Make Sex in Midlife the Best Yet – University Hospitals

Menopause Topics: Sexual Health – The Menopause Society

Menopause, Hormones and Women's Sexual Health with Dr. Rachel Ruben – unPAUSED podcast with Dr. Mary Claire Haver (This podcast is intended for adult audiences and includes frank discussions of sexual health and menopause.)

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