

# A Study of Sexuality and Health among Older Adults in the United States

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## Background

- i. There is a paucity of data that looks at the sexual function and behaviours of the increasing elderly population. Small studies have demonstrated that sexual relationships are maintained throughout life. These studies, however, do not include the very old and are not powered well.
- ii. Sexuality can serve as a marker for overall health and hence should be discussed in the physician's office.
- iii. Medications to treat sexual problems can have a variety of side effects in the elderly.

## Objective/Hypothesis

- i. obtain estimates on the prevalence of sexual activity, behaviour and problems in the elderly. Hypothesis being that profiles of activity would differ between men and women and amongst age groups.
- ii. describe the relationship between sexuality and a variety of health conditions

## Study Design

*Type:* Cross sectional survey

*Setting:* In-house interviews of a nationally representative sample.

*Inclusion Criteria:* community dwelling men and women, aged 57-85. There was oversampling of Blacks, Hispanics men and people in the 75-84 year old age group. Screening was done in 2004, while the interviewing took place between July 2005 and March 2006

*Participant Characteristics:* As described in table 1. To demonstrate a possible decline in sexual activity with increasing age, participants were classified by age groups and self rated health status.

*Outcomes:* Sexually active (mutual voluntary sexual contact with another partner within the past 12 months) or not. Healthy or not (self reported status). Types of sexual problems. Communication with physicians.

## Results:

- i. Majority of the elderly engage in sexual activity, although it declined with age and was consistently lower amongst women than men
- ii. Sexual activity is positively associated with self-reported health
- iii. Being in a relationship increases likelihood of being sexually active
- iv. Women rate sex as being less important than men do
- v. Roughly 50% of all respondents had at least one bothersome sexual problem; ~1/3 reported at least 2 problems
- vi. Number one reason for lack of sex amongst people in relationships – male partner's health (55% of men, 64% of women)
- vii. 38% of men, 22% of women greater than 50 have discussed sex with their doctors!!!
- ix. ¼ of people who are sexually active are not because of their sex problems.

## Comments

- i. Cross sectional study; a prospective study would provide more data regarding sexual problems and future decline in activity.
- ii. Sexual problems were assessed in only people who are sexually active; is lack of activity a problem that should be addressed?
- iii. Study is limited by self reported data
- iv. Physicians need to discuss sex with their patients
  - marker for general health
  - physicians can actually help enhance their sex life
  - STD transmission
  - interaction of sex-enhancing agents with other medications.
- v. There is an increased prevalence of depression and cognitive impairment in the elderly – could this contribute to sexual decline? This could actually be the presentation of HIV dementia in adults.
- vi. Is there a decline in sexual activity due to the drop in testosterone as we age? The BLAS showed that the most sexually active younger men had the slowest decline as they aged.