

Geriatric Set Getting It On Later in Life

(March 9) — Growing older just might not be so bad after all, according to a new study that finds healthy men and women are having more and better quality sex as they go into their golden years.

But as James Brown once crooned, it's a man's world.

A new University of Chicago study of middle-aged and older adults in the United States published this week in the British Medical Journal found that during the past decade, men have become more interested in sex, have a longer sexually active life expectancy and — for those who are still getting it on later in life — have sex they consider "good quality."

Women, however, are singing a slightly different tune. At age 30, women's sexually active life expectancy is estimated to stretch out another 31 years, compared with about 35 for men of the same age. Good health by age 55 adds time on the clock for both sexes, however, when sexually active life expectancy stretches out about 10 years for the ladies, while men of the same group expect another 15 years. Only half of older women reported they had a good quality sex life, the study found.

Once health starts to decline, however, men lose their edge — and more years of a sexually active life in comparison to women, said the study, which was based on responses from 3,000 25- to 74-year-olds and 3,000 57- to 85-year-olds.

"The estimation of sexually active life expectancy is a new life expectancy tool that can be used for projecting public health and patient needs in the arena of sexual health," concluded the study's authors, Stacy Lindau and Natalia Gavrilova.

The findings come at a time when the geriatric set verges on exploding. Baby boomers are on target for turning 65 starting next year, and by 2030, older Ameri-

cans are expected to account for about 20 percent of the country's population at 72 million — a doubling over 2000 levels, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

The study also found:

- About two-thirds of both middle-aged men and women reported a good quality sex life. Those numbers diverged sharply later in life, when only about 52 percent of older women reported good quality relations, versus about 71 percent among men.
- Men and women in good or excellent health were almost twice as likely to have interest in sex compared with those reporting poorer health.
- About 40 percent of men between the ages of 75 and 85 remain sexually active, compared with about 17 percent of women in the same age group.
- "For men, interest in sex was relatively stable across all age groups and did not vary by partner status," the study found. "For women, interest in sex dropped off significantly in the middle of the sixth decade and was much lower among those without partners."
- Knowing just how much sexually active life we have ahead of us as we age is important in charting future health care for the aging, according to one health academic. The areas of sexuality and aging aren't frequently studied, Texas A&M University health professor Patricia Goodson wrote in a British Medical Journal editorial commenting on the findings.
- The study gives hope, she said, amid the age of sexual performance enhancers such as Viagra, online social networking and improved access to health care overall.
- While the findings are positive, "less good news lies dormant in the shadows," she said, pointing to the male-favoring gender gap in sexually active life expectancy and the lack of detail about the quality of life in those years. The study found that when men reach age 55, their sexually active life expectancy fell short of their demographic life expectancy an average of eight or nine years.
- For women of the same age, that gap was 17 or 18 years. Still, the question remains why, "even though they enjoy fewer years of a sexually active life, many women do not perceive this as a 'problem,'" Goodson said.
- "How well equipped, willing and prepared sexuality researchers and health care providers are to help foster optimal quality, meaning, agency and purpose in those added years remains a challenging question for health care and public health," Goodson said.

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