

Desire and longevity: the sexuality of elderly women from a nursing perspective

Deseo y longevidad: la sexualidad de las mujeres mayores desde una perspectiva de enfermería

Desejo e longevidade: a sexualidade da mulher idosa sob o olhar da enfermagem

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the healthcare provided to elderly women, focusing on their experience of sexuality. To this end, a narrative literature review was conducted using searches in the Virtual Health Library, the Capes Periodicals Portal, and PubMed, resulting in the selection of 13 original articles. The analysis revealed that the sexuality of elderly women remains a topic that is rarely discussed, frequently rendered invisible, and marked by prejudice in both social and healthcare settings. There is a pressing need to broaden understanding of the subject and improve care practices through health education initiatives aimed at both women and professionals, who commonly face difficulties in addressing the topic. It is concluded that it is essential to promote comprehensive and humanized care that recognizes sexuality as a fundamental component of health and quality of life. This perspective fosters healthier, more pleasurable, and stigma-free relationships, contributing to an active and safe sex life in old age. Thus, the relevance of healthcare practices that value elderly women as subjects of rights, autonomy, and desires is reinforced.

Descriptors: Elderly Health; Sexuality; Women's Health; Nursing Care; Review.

Resumén

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo examinar la atención médica brindada a mujeres mayores, centrándose en su experiencia de la sexualidad. Para ello, se realizó una revisión narrativa de la literatura mediante búsquedas en la Biblioteca Virtual de Salud, el Portal de Periódicos CAPES y PubMed, resultando en la selección de 13 artículos originales. El análisis reveló que la sexualidad de las mujeres mayores sigue siendo un tema poco abordado, frecuentemente invisibilizado y marcado por prejuicios tanto en el ámbito social como en el sanitario. Existe una necesidad apremiante de ampliar la comprensión del tema y mejorar las prácticas de atención mediante iniciativas de educación para la salud dirigidas tanto a mujeres como a profesionales, quienes comúnmente enfrentan dificultades para abordar el tema. Se concluye que es esencial promover una atención integral y humanizada que reconozca la sexualidad como un componente fundamental de la salud y la calidad de vida. Esta perspectiva fomenta relaciones más saludables, placenteras y libres de estigma, contribuyendo a una vida sexual activa y segura en la vejez. De esta forma, se refuerza la relevancia de las prácticas de atención que valoran a las mujeres mayores como sujetos de derechos, autonomía y deseos.

Descriptorios: Salud del Adulto Mayor; Sexualidad; Salud de la Mujer; Atención de Enfermería; Revisión.

Resumo

Este estudo objetivou examinar a atenção à saúde oferecida a mulheres idosas, com foco na experiência da sexualidade. Para tanto, realizou-se uma revisão narrativa da literatura, mediante buscas na Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde, Portal de Periódicos Capes e PubMed, resultando na seleção de 13 artigos originais. A análise revelou que a sexualidade da mulher idosa permanece um tema pouco discutido, frequentemente invisibilizado e marcado por preconceitos nos âmbitos social e assistencial. Constata-se a necessidade premente de ampliar a compreensão sobre o assunto e aprimorar as práticas de cuidado, por meio de ações de educação em saúde voltadas tanto para as mulheres quanto para os profissionais, que comumente apresentam dificuldades na abordagem do tema. Conclui-se ser essencial promover um cuidado integral e humanizado, que reconheça a sexualidade como componente fundamental da saúde e da qualidade de vida. Tal perspectiva favorece relações mais saudáveis, prazerosas e livres de estigmas, contribuindo para uma vida sexual ativa e segura no envelhecimento. Reforça-se, assim, a relevância de práticas assistenciais que valorizem a mulher idosa como sujeito de direitos, autonomia e desejos.

Descritores: Saúde do Idoso; Sexualidade; Saúde da Mulher; Cuidados de Enfermagem; Revisão.



Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of elderly people both globally and in Brazil. Population aging has been occurring intensely among both men and women, revealing a greater presence of this group in scenarios related to the health-disease process. Faced with this new demographic reality, the way the country understands and responds to aging is transforming.

According to IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), life expectancy at birth in Brazil reached 76.6 years in 2019, representing a three-month increase compared to 2018. For men, life expectancy rose from 72.8 to 73.1 years; for women, from 79.9 to 80.1 years. This data reinforces that aging is a continuous and increasingly present phenomenon¹.

Beyond chronological age, aging is understood to be a natural process, marked by biological, psychological, and social changes that occur uniquely throughout life². In its World Report on Ageing and Health, the World Health Organization (WHO) highlights evidence that challenges old conceptions about old age. In the field of sexuality, research shows that older people remain sexually active, including those over 80 years old³.

However, it is observed that aging is still not fully valued by society, which can intensify vulnerabilities, costs associated with chronic diseases, and the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Furthermore, care related to sexuality in old age is frequently neglected, perpetuating the mistaken view that older people do not have a sexual life⁴.

The experience of sexuality throughout aging faces barriers related to misinformation and a reductionist view that associates sexuality solely with the sexual act. Among older women, sexual satisfaction is often more associated with emotional bonding and companionship, highlighting the importance of biopsychosocial aspects.

Since 1999, the National Health Policy for the Elderly has reaffirmed that sexuality is a human right, frequently omitted in people's lives⁵. In line with this, the World Association for Sexual Health (WAS) established the Declaration of Sexual Rights and the annual celebration of World Sexual Health Day on September 4th, intending to promote reflection, education, and social awareness on the subject⁶.

Sexuality is now recognized as a factor that directly influences quality of life. This, in turn, depends on the individual's perception of their position in life, their values, expectations, and goals, reinforcing the importance of a holistic approach to aging⁷. Thus, aging does not imply an absence of sexuality. However, cultural taboos, religious beliefs, family relationships, individual characteristics, and physiological changes still reinforce stigmas that limit the affective-sexual expression of older people⁸. Sexuality encompasses the body, emotional relationships, social bonds, values, and emotions, and not just sexual activity.

Given this scenario, this study proposes to discuss how nursing care addresses the sexual health of elderly women. The role of this professional is fundamental, both directly, in clinical care, and indirectly, in coordinating services and promoting well-being. The greatest challenge

lies in improving the quality of life and encouraging active and healthy aging. It is important to emphasize that many nursing professionals feel ill-prepared to address aspects of sexuality in old age, which may stem from gaps in academic training and professional practice⁹. Considering this context, the objective of this research is to describe the healthcare provided to elderly women and/or women in the aging process concerning sexuality.

The relevance of this study is related to the lack of information and understanding within society and families regarding the physiological and emotional changes that influence female sexuality in aging. Given the increase in life expectancy and the rapid growth of the elderly population, studying sexuality in old age becomes essential. Experiences gained during my undergraduate nursing studies, such as in classes, lectures, practical training, and internships, allowed me to reflect on the importance of nursing practice in primary care, especially in the comprehensive care of elderly women.

Methodology

This is a bibliographic review of scientific literature, which allows for mapping, synthesizing, and critically discussing existing knowledge on a specific topic, elucidating its development and current state from a theoretical and contextual perspective. This type of study is based on the analysis and critical interpretation of relevant scientific productions, providing an integrated and reflective view on the investigated issue¹⁰.

The investigation was guided by the following guiding question: "How is attention given to the health of aging or elderly women in the context of sexuality?"

The search strategy was carried out systematically, from August to September 2025, in the following electronic databases: Virtual Health Library (BVS), Portal of Periodicals of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes), and PubMed/Medline.

To ensure the relevance and quality of the sample, the following inclusion criteria were established: original scientific articles available in full; publications in Portuguese, English, or Spanish; studies that directly addressed the sexuality of elderly women or women in the aging process in the context of healthcare; and a time frame between the years 2021 and 2025, to prioritize the most recent literature. Editorials, letters, experience reports not based on research, and studies whose focus was not the investigated topic were excluded.

The search equation was constructed using the Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS) and their equivalents in the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH), combined by the Boolean operator "AND" to refine the results. The final string applied was: ("Women" OR "Mulheres") AND ("Aging" OR "Envelhecimento") AND ("Nursing" OR "Enfermagem") AND ("Sexuality" OR "Sexualidade") AND ("Aged" OR "Idoso"). This combination aimed to capture the production that articulates these central concepts.

The selection process followed these steps: initial identification of records in the databases; removal of duplicates; screening by title and abstract, applying the



Sodré CP, Albuquerque Netto L, Santos LPS, Nogueira GA, Duarte ACS, Chicharo SCR, Theodoro VVC, Ferreira SR, Oliveira BC, Fernandes JC, Silva CSSL eligibility criteria; and finally, full reading of the pre-selected articles. After the final selection, the studies were organized into emerging thematic categories based on their content. Subsequently, a critical analysis of the material was conducted, aiming to synthesize evidence, identify convergences and gaps in knowledge, and discuss the contributions to understand sexual health care for older women from a nursing perspective.

Results and Discussion

Considering the combination of previously defined descriptors, the final search identified 13 articles distributed

among the Virtual Health Library (VHL), the CAPES Periodicals Portal, and the PubMed/Medline database. To reach this total, duplicate references were initially eliminated, followed by reading the titles and abstracts. Studies that did not address the research question or that presented incomplete information were excluded. After applying the eligibility criteria, the following were selected: 2 articles from the VHL (LILACS and BDEFN), 2 articles from the CAPES Portal (DOAJ and CINAHL), and 9 articles from the PubMed/Medline database. The distribution of the studies is detailed in Table 1. The detailed distribution of the included studies is presented in Chart 1 below.

Chart 1. Description of the studies included in this review. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil, 2025

Title	Authors/Year	Library/Database	Year	Journal	Objective	Language
Envelhecimento saudável em mulheres idosas vivendo com HIV: uma revisão sistemática de fatores psicossociais	Rubtsova; Kempf et al., 2017	PubMed/Medline	2021	Current HIV/AIDS Reports	Explore the current state of knowledge, identify gaps, and make recommendations for future research.	English
Vivência da sexualidade por mulheres idosas	Nascimento; Marin et al., 2017	BVS – LILACS/BDEFN	2021	Revista de Enfermagem da UERJ	Interpret the experience of sexuality by elderly women and construct an explanatory theoretical model.	Portuguese
“O prazer é melhor à medida que envelheço”: saúde sexual, sexualidade e comportamentos sexuais de risco entre mulheres mais velhas vivendo com HIV	Taylor; Munoz-Plaza et al., 2017	PubMed/Medline	2021	Archives of Sexual Behavior	Explore the importance of sex and sexuality among people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) to identify sexual health needs and HIV prevention.	English
Conhecimento de idosos australianos sexualmente ativos sobre infecções sexualmente transmissíveis	Lyons; Heywood et al., 2017	PubMed/Medline	2021	Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health	Identify older adults' knowledge about STIs and safer sex practices.	English
Envelhecimento, sexualidade e cuidados de enfermagem: o olhar da mulher idosa	Souza; Gomes et al., 2019	BVS – LILACS/BDEFN	2023	Revista Brasileira de Enfermagem	Analyze the perception of elderly women regarding sexuality and the practice of nursing care.	Portuguese
Concepção de mulheres idosas sobre a sexualidade na velhice	Santos; Santos et al., 2019	Portal CAPES/CINAHL	2023	Revista de Enfermagem UFPE On Line	Analyze the conceptions of sexuality in old age held by older women.	Portuguese
Desvelamento crítico em sexualidade desenvolvido com idosas como dispositivo de avaliação educativa dialógica	Rodrigues; Nogueira et al., 2019	Portal CAPES/DOAJ	2023	Revista Baiana de Enfermagem	Analyze critical perceptions about sexuality acquired in cultural circles.	Portuguese
A transição da menopausa e a saúde da mulher na meia-idade: relatório do progresso do Estudo da Saúde da Mulher em Toda a Nação (SWAN)	Khoudary; Greendale et al., 2019	PubMed/Medline	2023	Menopause	Define the menopausal transition, its antecedents, and its biological and psychosocial consequences.	English
Explorando a preocupação com o HIV em uma população de mulheres dominicanas com 50 anos ou mais	Odlum; Black et al., 2019	PubMed/Medline	2023	BMC Public Health	Identify HIV risk perceptions in middle-aged and older Dominican women.	English
Usando o Facebook para contar histórias de envelhecimento prematuro e saúde sexual e reprodutiva	Shah; Bradbury-Jones; Taylor, 2020	PubMed/Medline	2021	BMJ Open	Increase understanding of the bodily and lifestyle effects of aging with cerebral palsy.	English
Buscando ajuda para dificuldades sexuais: achados de um estudo com idosos em quatro países europeus	Hinchliff; Carvalheira et al., 2020	PubMed/Medline	2022	European Journal of Ageing	Identify how sexual activity and intimacy contribute to the quality of life.	English
Viver solteira: necessidades e preocupações de mulheres solteiras com mais de 35 anos	Shahrak; Serge; Taghizadeh, 2021	PubMed/Medline	2021	BMC Psychology	Discover the needs and concerns of unmarried women in Iran.	English



Caminhos para a busca de ajuda para dificuldades sexuais em idosos	Hinchliff; Lewis et al., 2021	PubMed/Medline	2021	Age and Ageing	Explore the reasons why older adults seek or do not seek help for sexual difficulties.	English
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To answer the guiding question of this review and understand how healthcare for older women or women in the aging process is configured in the context of sexuality, it was observed that the selected studies addressed different dimensions of the topic. The analyzed productions addressed: Sexuality in old age and its experiences; the menopausal transition and the unveiling of sexuality in middle-aged women; Seeking help for sexual difficulties and healthy aging through information; and Concern about STIs and HIV in the middle-aged female population.

Sexuality in old age and its experiences

Although the biological and hormonal changes associated with aging are often perceived negatively, not all women experience these changes in a limiting way, finding other forms of satisfaction and well-being. Sexuality, when fully experienced, can represent a positive element in old age; however, it remains a topic little discussed by both health professionals and the general population. Several factors influence how older women experience their sexuality, including a lack of information, inadequate guidance, and the social prejudice that still surrounds this issue¹¹.

The transformations resulting from aging do not prevent the experience of fulfilling sexuality. The literature corroborates the accounts of the interviewees by highlighting that sexuality involves feelings, attraction, and desire for a partner, allowing, even at this stage of life, the possibility of enjoying satisfying sexual relations. Furthermore, the opportunity to explore one's own sexuality, experiment with new practices, and experience diverse learnings and experiences remains present^{11,12}.

It is important to highlight the need to incorporate discussions about sexuality in a structured way into nursing care routines, to promote changes in health standards, work practices, and reflection on personal and social values. This approach contributes to the collective confrontation of taboos and prejudices that still surround this dimension of human health¹³. However, gaps persist in the debate about sexuality among different audiences and age groups, especially among older people. There is also a lack of guidance on how nursing professionals should address issues related to this topic¹¹.

The menopausal transition and the unveiling of sexuality in middle-aged women

One of the studies analyzed presents dialogue as an evaluative instrument in the formative process, as it promotes a critical view of reality and allows existential questions to be recognized and reinterpreted, favoring new ways of overcoming challenges. Educational methods that use dialogue and problematization allow for rethinking experiences and attributing new meanings to them, highlighting the degree of understanding achieved. In a dynamic environment of knowledge exchange, space is

created for critical unveiling and, consequently, for the strengthening and empowerment of the participants¹⁴.

Menopause represents a significant event in a woman's health journey, with repercussions that extend beyond the reproductive field. The biological, psychological, behavioral, and social changes that accompany this period decisively influence women's middle age and future well-being. Current knowledge about menopause largely results from fundamental studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite the evident need to broaden understanding of reproductive health, sociocultural barriers and forms of discrimination persist, hindering women's full access to care in this area¹⁵. Longitudinal studies have contributed to a more comprehensive understanding, going beyond the limited accounts of women seeking clinical care and offering a more representative view of the female experience¹⁶.

Unlike more individualistic societies, collectively oriented cultures, present in regions of Africa, South and Central America, Southern Europe, and Asia, tend to consider a woman remaining single in old age as contrary to norms and traditions. In these cultures, marriage in young adulthood is understood as a natural stage of development, and the marital bond is expected to last a lifetime. In such contexts, social norms can have significant impacts on the lives and reproductive health of single women. A study conducted in Iran, for example, revealed that never having been married is seen as a social stigma¹⁵.

According to stigma theory, each society establishes values and standards that classify and hierarchize individuals. Thus, single women may be perceived as deviating from social expectations, reinforcing processes of psychosocial discrimination. This phenomenon is even more evident in Asian countries, where marriage is considered a central social norm, and female singleness tends to be interpreted as something abnormal. Consequently, women who have never married may face psychological suffering, lack of prospects, and the feeling of being a burden to others. Many end up isolating themselves and avoiding community life, which intensifies feelings of loneliness¹⁵.

Seeking help for sexual difficulties and healthy aging through information

The media offers multiple benefits to different audiences, including people with and without disabilities. Many individuals have experienced isolation and exclusion in traditional social networks due to barriers that hinder their access and social participation. In this scenario, Facebook emerges as a space that fosters communication, collective mobilization, and awareness. The platform enables historically excluded people to debate, exchange ideas, and interact with others who share similar interests and concerns. Thus, they begin to participate in research, acquire knowledge, and integrate communities that promote support and strengthen shared identities and challenges. For people with cerebral palsy, who frequently face speech and



Sodré CP, Albuquerque Netto L, Santos LPS, Nogueira GA, Duarte ACS, Chicharo SCR, Theodoro VVC, Ferreira SR, Oliveira BC, Fernandes JC, Silva CSSL mobility limitations, virtual groups are more accessible spaces than face-to-face support networks and groups¹⁷.

In the context of sexuality, older women face factors that negatively influence how they experience their sex lives, and access to information acts as an essential resource to overcome these obstacles. This information arrives through different media, such as television, radio, computers, and social networks, reinforcing that sexuality remains present in old age and highlighting social and cultural barriers that hinder its expression. Faced with this reality, initiatives and alternatives aimed at adapting sexual experiences in old age are emerging¹². Large-scale studies, conducted primarily in high-income countries, show that many older adults remain engaged in sexual activity^{17,18}. Sexual satisfaction remains a significant aspect of life for people aged 60 and over, contributing to well-being. However, this population faces considerable obstacles in seeking and obtaining support when experiencing sexual difficulties.

One study examined data from a population survey (n = 3820) on sexuality and aging, conducted among people aged 60 to 75 in Norway, Denmark, Belgium, and Portugal, focusing on seeking help for sexual problems. It was observed that men (12.2%) sought professional help more frequently than women (6.8%) in the previous five years. The main reason given for seeking help was the importance attributed to sex by the participant and/or their marital relationship. The primary source of care was the primary care physician. Among those who sought help, 48% reported satisfaction with the care, 31.6% remained neutral, and 20.4% expressed dissatisfaction. Many participants also resorted to informal sources, such as partners, friends, and websites. Among the reasons for not seeking professional help were little concern about the symptoms and the expectation that the problem would resolve itself spontaneously. Multivariate analysis revealed that the level of discomfort with sexual difficulties was the main factor associated with seeking help in both sexes. In the case of women, those who were married and/or residing in Portugal were more likely to seek professional support; among men, those who attended religious services also showed a greater propensity to seek assistance¹⁸. These findings have important implications for public health and can inform educational initiatives, communication strategies, and improvements in the provision of services for older adults facing sexual difficulties^{19,20}.

Vulnerability to STIs and HIV in middle-aged women

The increasing feminization and expansion of the profiles affected by HIV and other STIs reinforce the urgency of prevention strategies that consider the racial, cultural, and social specificities of the most vulnerable groups. The demographic configurations of the AIDS epidemic have been continuously changing, which requires that preventive actions remain current and sensitive to transformations, especially among middle-aged and elderly women, an age group in which risk recognition is still rarely discussed^{21,22}.

A survey of 2,137 Australians aged 60 and over, containing 15 questions about STIs and safe sex practices,

assessed the level of knowledge of this population. On average, participants answered 10.9 questions correctly (SD = 2.8; range 0 to 15). The results indicated that most adequately understood fundamental information about STIs, such as causes (88%), symptoms (91%), and modes of transmission (87%). They also clearly identified risk factors (93%), recognized that the risk does not decrease with age (81%), and that such infections can be asymptomatic (89%). Regarding the concept of safe sex, 92% correctly identified that it involves the use of condoms and the absence of contact with bodily fluids. However, knowledge about the effectiveness of condoms (64%) and about the transmission routes of specific STIs proved to be more limited. Accurate scores were lower for chlamydia (73%, 55%, and 40%), genital herpes (77% and 75%), gonorrhea (44%), and genital warts (38%). This indicates that, although well-informed in general aspects, participants had difficulty identifying specific characteristics of some STIs. It was also observed that women had greater mastery of the subject than men. Among men, those with higher education, younger age within the group (around 60 years old), and a broader perception of their own risk performed better. Men and women previously tested for STIs or who reported diverse sources of information also showed a higher level of knowledge²³.

Latin American cultural elements, such as Marianism, which encourages female behaviors of submission and sexual passivity, and "macheza," which promotes masculine behaviors of authority and a greater number of partners, emerged as relevant influences on the risk of infection. When associated with religious beliefs, these patterns further amplify female vulnerability. Furthermore, the stigma related to HIV and STIs continues to hinder preventive actions and the search for information, especially among middle-aged and elderly women. This aspect was evident, for example, on the account of a participant describing a widow who was humiliated when requesting an HIV test²².

The fear of being stigmatized also leads many women to avoid initiating conversations about safe sex practices within their relationships, perpetuating risky behaviors, especially in stable relationships. The way each person perceives threats to their own health is built upon an understanding of their vulnerability, directly influencing preventive actions and behaviors adopted in daily life^{22,23}.

Conclusion

This review aimed to present how healthcare for aging and/or elderly women is structured concerning sexuality. It was observed that understanding these women's thoughts and feelings about their sex lives is fundamental not only to recognizing how sexuality integrates with aging, but also to supporting strategies capable of assessing and responding to the impacts of old age on this dimension, ensuring positive sexual experiences. Studies indicate that the topic is complex and that nursing plays an essential role in different care contexts. The relevance of this professional is highlighted, given their direct and continuous connection with elderly women;



Sodré CP, Albuquerque Netto L, Santos LPS, Nogueira GA, Duarte ACS, Chicharo SCR, Theodoro VVC, Ferreira SR, Oliveira BC, Fernandes JC, Silva CSSL however, an approach oriented towards strengthening sexuality in aging is necessary, considering the singularities and diverse realities of these women.

It is essential to adopt a new approach, based on health education for both older women and professionals, promoting comprehensive care that fosters a healthy,

pleasurable sex life free from judgment or violence. Thus, nurses face the challenge of deconstructing stigmas and prejudices associated with sexuality in old age. Current research is essential to broaden understanding and improve practices related to this field.

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