

Lesbian /Gay Health

Lesbian Sex at Menopause: Better than Ever

Esther Rothblum and Ellen Cole, researchers in psychology, decided two years ago to survey women about sex at menopause. They found that published research presented menopause as a negative experience for women because its data was based only on the experiences of women who sought treatment for uncomfortable symptoms. Another problem with the existing research was that none of it had studied lesbians.

Their first step was to contact lesbians in Vermont and interview them in detail about their sexuality after menopause. The researchers asked these women to talk about every aspect of their sexual lives before, during, and after menopause. From these responses Rothblum and Cole developed an open-ended questionnaire.

They then placed ads in several publications asking women who were menopausal to complete the questionnaires. They received 41 responses and have summarized the results, which follow.

The mean age of the 41 women was 51.5 years, and the majority of women indicated that they were either lesbian or bisexual. The respondents' length of time since their last menstrual period averaged 5 years and most of them were seeking some sort of medical care for menopausal symptoms.

The majority of women questioned were in a committed relationship with a partner and currently engaged in sexual activity. Forty-six percent stated that frequency of sexual activity had remained the same since the onset of menopause with 15% indicating that sexual activity had increased. When questioned if there had been a change in the type of sexual activity, 71% said that there was no change in the types of activities that they enjoyed since the onset of menopause. Twenty-nine percent indicated that there was a change. Comments included increased interest in

rougher sex with penetration, ability to sustain orgasm for a longer period, increased holding, hugging, cuddling, more manual and genital sex, and a greater focus on safer sex. Several women indicated that changes in their sexual activity were not necessarily related to menopause, but instead due to such factors as "the timely mellowing of our relationship."

When asked specifically about the quality of their sexual experiences since menopause, 27% expressed a decrease in quality and 38% indicated either no change or increased quality of experiences.

Rothblum and Cole asked the respondents to indicate if they felt that they had a sex problem and whether it was new since menopause. Seventy-six percent of the women responded "no".

Sixty-six percent of the respondents indicated that their level of sexual desire and interest in sex had either not changed or had increased since menopause.

In terms of their sexual partners response to them, 54% of the women had not noticed any change. Of those that noticed changes, women were puzzled as to whether the changes were really related to menopause or other factors.

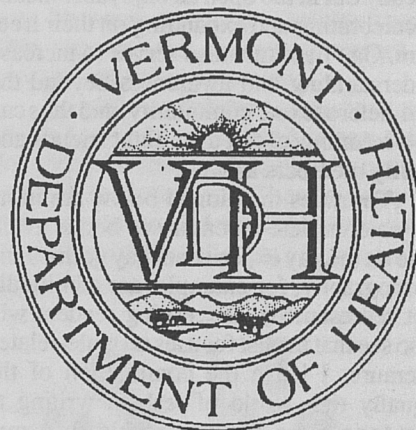
When the questions concentrated on positive changes in their lives since menopause, the majority of women indicated that they of the enjoyed absence of menstruation.

Rothblum and Cole interpret their findings cautiously. The small sample size may be biased toward a healthy outlook on menopause. To the best of their knowledge, the study is the first on the sexual attitudes and behaviors of lesbians at menopause.

The authors conclude that it is possible that if all women, lesbian and non-lesbian, could be free of heterosexist hangups about sexual functioning and the

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