



Sexuality & Aging: Debunking the Myths



Office of the State Long-Term Care

OMBUDSMAN

Established within the Iowa Department on Aging
515.725.3333 | 866.236.1430 | www.iowaaging.gov

Due to recent headlines from Iowa and throughout the country, aging and sexuality has become a frequent topic of discussion. Specifically, questions have been raised about if and how older adults experience sexual desire; how dementia and other age-related health issues impact an individual's ability to express desire for and consent to sexual acts; and whether older adults forfeit their right to intimacy once they move into a long-term care facility.

Because sexuality is a basic human need and the choice to participate in sexual acts is one that belongs to the individual, the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman (OSLTCO) is working to help debunk some of the myths that surround sexuality and aging. While every individual's situation and capacity to consent varies, the following facts may help guide meaningful dialogue about older adults and sexuality.

For more information or to request staff training around aging and sexuality, please contact the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman at 866.236.1430.

MYTH: Sex is for the young and attractive.

FACT: Only in the media! Sex does not belong solely to the youthful and beautiful. People don't "age out" of being sexual. It is inherent throughout the aging process and even associated with good health! Sexual expression fulfills a natural desire and can connect people, provide opportunities for affection and passion and build or enhance relationships.

MYTH: Older adults are unable to have sex because their bodies are too old or sick.

FACT: Some changes within the aging body can alter or complicate sexual expression and declines in sexual functioning may occur, but desire and interest remain. The use of medications to treat sexual dysfunction in both men and women has made it possible for people to remain sexually active late into life. One study revealed 61 percent of people over 60 said their sex life today was the same or better than in their 40s, and 26 percent of those over 75 remain sexually active.

MYTH: Residents of nursing facilities can't have sex.

FACT: Relocation to a nursing facility doesn't result in the end of a sex life. Residents are guaranteed certain rights under the federal 1987 Nursing Home Reform Law, including the rights to privacy, confidentiality, respect and expression. Facilities must promote these rights in a manner that enhances residents' quality of life and ensures dignity, choice and self-determination, while affording them privacy and opportunity to engage in safe and consensual sexual expression.

MYTH: Nursing facility residents with dementia or Alzheimer's shouldn't have sex.

FACT: Residents with cognitive impairments, such as dementia and Alzheimer's, have the same rights as other nursing facility residents. When a cognitively impaired resident indicates the desire to be sexually expressive, it becomes necessary for the resident's interdisciplinary care team to assess the level of capacity to determine the benefits or potential harm associated with the expression. Each sexually related occurrence is unique and should be looked at individually.