

Sexuality experiences by elderly women

Vivências de sexualidade na ótica de mulheres na terceira idade

Rosane dos Santos Polleto Chagas¹ 

Fátima Helena Cecchetto² 

Fernando Riegel³ 

^{1,2}Cesuca Centro Universitário (Cachoeirinha). Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. rosanepollete@hotmail.com, fatimacecchetto@cesuca.edu.br

³Corresponding author. Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso (Barra do Garças). Mato Grosso, Brazil. fernandoriegel85@gmail.com

ABSTRACT | OBJETIVO: To understand the experiences of women in old age in relation to sexuality. **METHOD:** An integrative review carried out through five steps described by Cooper. The search was carried out in the LILACS, BDNF and SCIELO databases, using the descriptors women's health, health of the elderly, nursing, seniors, and sexuality. 18 articles were included. **RESULTS:** It was found in the elderly women the reduction or inexistence of behaviors related to sexuality; existence of prejudices, myths and social taboos and oppressive culture; maintaining sexual practices to maintain marriage; verification of unsafe sexual experiences and practices, related to the non-use of condoms; understanding that sexuality involves affective and emotional aspects, in addition to the sexual act. Positive and negative factors related to the experience of sexuality by elderly women were also identified. **CONCLUSION:** There was a higher prevalence of negative factors related to the experience of sexuality by these women than positive factors. There are few studies that demonstrate the full experience of sexuality and the impacts on the quality of life of women in old age.

DESCRIPTORS: Women's health. Health of the elderly. Nursing. Third age. Sexuality.

RESUMO | OBJETIVO: Compreender as vivências de mulheres na terceira idade em relação à sexualidade. **MÉTODO:** Revisão integrativa realizada através de cinco etapas descritas por Cooper. A busca foi realizada nas bases de dados LILACS, BDNF e SCIELO, utilizando-se os descritores Saúde da Mulher, Saúde do Idoso, Enfermagem, Terceira Idade, Sexualidade. Foram incluídos 18 artigos. **RESULTADOS:** Verificou-se nas mulheres da terceira idade a redução ou inexistência de comportamentos relacionados à sexualidade; existência de preconceitos, mitos e tabus sociais e a cultura opressiva; manutenção de práticas sexuais para manter o casamento; constatação de vivências e práticas sexuais inseguras, relacionadas ao não uso do preservativo; compreensão de que a sexualidade envolve aspectos afetivos e emocionais, além do ato sexual. Também foram identificados os fatores positivos e negativos relacionados à vivência da sexualidade pelas mulheres da terceira idade. **CONCLUSÃO:** Evidenciou-se maior prevalência de fatores negativos relacionados à vivência da sexualidade por estas mulheres do que fatores positivos. São escassos os estudos que constataam a vivência plena da sexualidade e os impactos na qualidade de vida da mulher na terceira idade.

DESCRITORES: Saúde da Mulher. Saúde do Idoso. Enfermagem. Terceira Idade. Sexualidade.

Introduction

Aging is a non-pathological, sequential and irreversible process of changes in the human organism takes place in an individual and cumulative way. It is a natural evolution of the organism through its deterioration, considered the last phase of the life cycle, which involves social withdrawal, psychomotor and cognitive losses, and restriction in social roles¹.

For many older adults, old age is related to negative aspects such as lack of vitality, fatigue, illness, isolation and disability, and it is conceived and directly associated with disease, degradation of body image, loss of self-esteem, decreased libido, uselessness, family distancing, and death².

When the aging process occurs successfully, the older adult is able to adapt to new limitations, maintaining some degree of satisfaction in life³. Among other ways of promoting active and successful aging, sexual practice is a favorable activity, even with reduced frequency⁴.

The decrease in the frequency of sexual intercourse can be related to advancing age, use of medications, existence of pathologies, and decreased sexual desire⁵. For the elderly woman, the physical and hormonal transformations and the religious and cultural patterns, family oppression and individual particularities consolidate the social stigma of the impossibility of her own attractive view and her ability to seduce and fully experience sexuality⁶.

Sexuality is considered a set of behaviors that involves feelings, caresses, and words, among other aspects, and not only the relationship or sexual act itself³. This theme goes beyond the "physical or organic issue, but it has a great influence on the psychological aspect and how individuals can exercise their sexual activity in the course of their lives"².

However, it should be considered that the active maintenance of sexuality in older adults has shown an increase in cases of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), in many cases due to the negligence of this population in relation to preventive methods, in addition to aspects related to health education and promotion⁷.

In view of this, this study is justified in the need to understand how elderly women mean sexuality in old age, seeking to improve the quality of life and to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, in view of the high rates of STIs in this stage of life. This study had the following as guiding question: How is sexuality presented from the perspective of women in old age? The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of women of an advanced age in relation to sexuality.

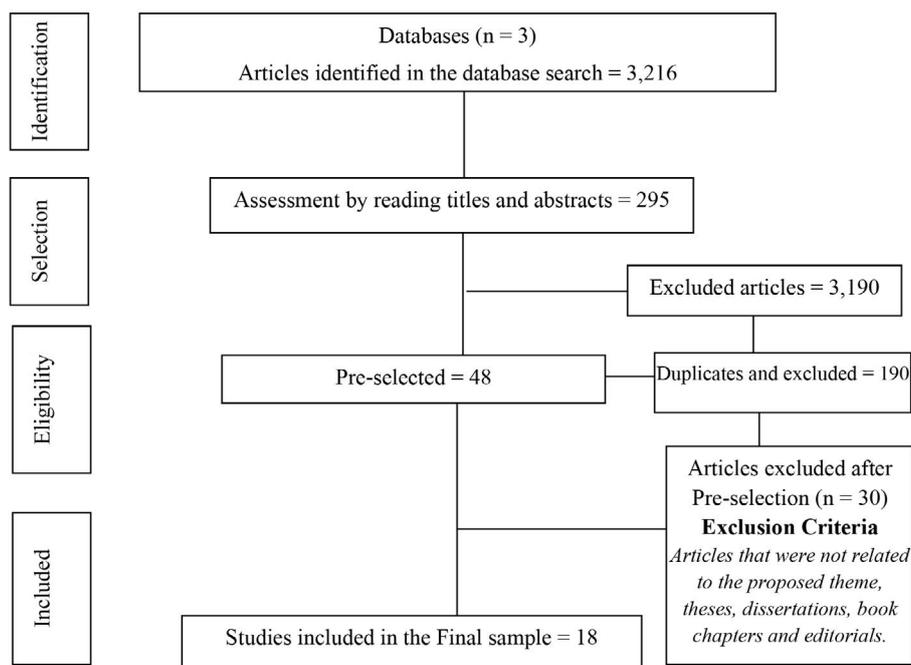
Method

This is an integrative review that, according to Cooper⁸, must be carried out in five consecutive stages: formulation of the problem, data collection, data evaluation, analysis and interpretation of the collected data, and public presentation.

This research was carried out through the search for scientific articles in the database of the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Science and Health (LILACS), and the Nursing Database (BDENF), using the following Health Sciences Descriptors (*Descritores em Ciências da Saúde*, DeCS) for the search: *Saúde da Mulher* (Women's Health), *Saúde do Idoso* (Health of the Older Adult), *Enfermagem* (Nursing), *Terceira Idade* (Old Age), and *Sexualidade* (Sexuality). The Boolean operator "AND" was used in the following combinations of descriptors: women's health AND sexuality; health of the older adult AND sexuality; women's health AND old age. The inclusion criteria were articles that answered the guiding question, available in the databases free of charge and entirely in Portuguese, published in the last ten years (between 2008 and 2018). The exclusion criteria included theses, dissertations, monographs, and journalistic reports.

Data collection took place from March to April 2019. 3,216 articles were identified in the initial search, 1,566 in the LILACS database, 871 in BDENF, and 776 in Scielo. After selection according to the inclusion, title and duplicity criteria, 3,190 articles were excluded, leaving 295 articles and, after reading the abstracts, 247 were excluded for not answering the guiding question, leaving 48 articles. Finally, after proceeding with the complete reading of the pre-selected articles, 18 were included in this integrative review.

Figure 1. Flowchart of the study selection process, referring to the electronic search in the LILACS, SciELO and BDEF library databases, in the period between the years 2008 and 2018 - Cachoeirinha, RS, Brazil, 2020



To perform data evaluation, a data organization form was used for the data of the articles included in the study, and its analysis and interpretation occurred through the synthesis, comparison, and discussion of the data through a synoptic chart. The results were presented in a descriptive manner through their synthesis. This study fully maintained the articles and data from electronic databases, preserving the authors and respecting the copyrights according to Law No. 12,853, of August 14th, 2013⁹.

Results

Chart 1 presents the description of the articles included in this integrative review.

Chart 1. Description of the studies included in the integrative review, according to title and main results.
Cachoeirinha, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019 (to be continued)

CODE AUTHORS	TITLE	RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH STUDIES
A1 Arcoverde MAM, Labronici, LM ¹⁰	Faces ocultas da sexualidade emergente de idosos: um estudo fenomenológico.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcendence of the biological view of sex; • Sexuality with companionship.
A2 Rodrigues DMMR, Labegalini CMG, Higarashi IH, Heidemann ITSB, Baldissera VDA ¹¹	O Percurso educativo dialógico como estratégia de cuidado com mulheres idosas na sexualidade.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concept of sexuality related to intercourse; • Experiencing sexuality as a practice of young women; • Existence of preconceptions.
A3 Burigo GF, Fachini IH, Garetti B, Streicher CCI, Rosa RS ¹²	Sexualidade e comportamento de idosos vulneráveis a doenças sexualmente transmissíveis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsafe sexual experiences and practices; • Vulnerability to STIs.
A4 Moreira TM, Parreira BDM, Diniz MA, Silva SR ¹³	Conhecimento das mulheres idosas sobre doenças sexualmente transmissíveis, conhecimento, uso e acesso aos métodos preventivos.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medium level knowledge of the STIs and of prevention means, with no habit of condom use.
A5 Marques ADB, Silva RP, Sousa SS, Santana RS, Deus SRM; Amorim RF ¹⁴	A vivência da sexualidade de idosos em um centro de convivência.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active sexuality, apart from the practice of sex, involving feelings.
A6 Cunha LM, Mota WS, Gomes SC, Ribeiro FMA, Bezerra IMP, Machado MFAS, Quirino GS ¹⁵	Vovó e vovô também amam: sexualidade na terceira idade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in approaching the subject matter in the consultations with elderly women.
A7 Frugoli A, Magalhães JCAO ¹⁶	A sexualidade na terceira idade na percepção de um grupo de idosas e indicações para a educação sexual.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexuality and intercourse as synonyms; • Possibility of an active and healthy sex life; • Not using condoms after the age of 60; • Doubts, fears, and preconceptions on the theme; • Limited experience of sexuality.
A8 Coelho DNP, Daher DV, Santana RF, Santo FHE ³	Percepção de mulheres idosas sobre sexualidade: implicações de gênero e no cuidado de enfermagem.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in expressing sexuality; • Experience of conflicts, confusing sex, sexual relation, and sexuality.
A9 Oliveira EL, Neves ALM, Silva IR ¹⁷	Sentidos de sexualidade entre mulheres idosas: relações de gênero, ideologias mecanicistas e subversão.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex as an obligation; • Lack of desire X Existence of sexual desire.
A10 Pereira D, Ponte F, Costa E ¹⁸	Preditores das atitudes negativas face ao envelhecimento e face à sexualidade na terceira idade.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of negative attitudes towards aging and less permissive attitudes towards sexuality in old age.
A11 Uchôa YS, Costa DCA, Silva JIAP, Silva STSE, Freitas WMTM, Soares SCS ⁷	A sexualidade sob o olhar da pessoa idosa.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The myth that older adults are asexual due to: lack of information, physiological changes,, and preconceptions.
A12 Alencar DL, Marques, APO, Leal MCC, Vieira JCM ¹⁹	Exercício da sexualidade em pessoas idosas e os fatores relacionados.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexuality related to genitality; • Existence of sexual activity; • Self-erotization.
A13 Queiroz MAC, Lourenço RME, Coelho MMF, Miranda KCL, Barbosa RGB, Bezerra STF ²⁰	Representações sociais da sexualidade entre idosos.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love, respect and affection are central elements of sexuality in old age.

Chart 1. Description of the studies included in the integrative review, according to title and main results. Cachoeirinha, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019 (conclusion)

CODE AUTHORS	TITLE	RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH STUDIES
A14 Maschio MBM, Balbino AP, Souza PFR, Kalinke LP ²¹	Sexualidade na terceira idade: medidas de prevenção para doenças sexualmente transmissíveis e AIDS.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Older adults have desires, sexual needs and make projects for the future.
A15 Moraes KM, Vasconcelos DP, Silva ASR, Silva RCC, Santiago LMM, Freitas CASL ²²	Companheirismo e sexualidade de casais na melhor idade: cuidando do casal idoso.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings involving sexuality; • There is a decrease in the pattern of sexual activity; • Prejudice regarding the expression of affection; • Strengthening the bond.
A16 Souza M, Marcon SS, Bueno SMV, Carreira L, Baldissera VDA ²³	A vivência da sexualidade por idosas viúvas e suas percepções quanto à opinião dos familiares a respeito.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not fully experiencing sexuality; • Oppression of society and the family; • Lack of encouragement from family members.
A17 Biasus F, Demantova A, Camargo BV ²⁴	Representações sociais do envelhecimento e da sexualidade para pessoas com mais de 50 anos.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexuality as feelings; • Less frequent sex, but higher quality, due to health problems; • Lack of partner as a barrier to sexuality
A18 Oliveira DC, Cotica CS ²⁵	Sexualidade e qualidade de vida na idade avançada.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased sexual activity and desire due to age, pathologies, medication use; • Sexuality revealed through feelings, going beyond intercourse.

Source: The authors (2019).

When performing the technique of content analysis of the articles found and included in the study, it was possible to verify 10 axes pointed out by elderly women as determinants and related to the experience of sexuality by them. Positive and negative factors related to the experience of sexuality by elderly women were also identified, shown in Chart 2.

Chart 2. Factors related to the experience of sexuality by elderly women. Cachoeirinha, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019

Positive factors	Negative factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintenance of active sexuality; - Association of sexuality with affective and emotional involvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decrease in the experience of sexuality in old age; - Restricted association of sexuality with intercourse; - Existence of preconceptions in relation to the experience of sexuality and aging by the older adults and the myth that older adults are asexual; - Unsafe sexual experiences and practices, especially related to poor adherence to condom use, making women more vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections; - Continuity of sexual practices due to the obligations of marriage at the expense of desire; - The oppressive culture of society and the family in relation to the experience of the sexuality of elderly women.

Source: The authors (2019).

Among the factors surveyed in the research, there was prevalence of negative factors related to the experience of sexuality by elderly women, which is very linked to culture and prejudice, with society having attributed sexuality to the sexual act itself, which is compromised with advanced; however, any form of exercising sexuality must be valued and introduced into the unique daily lives of adult women in order to preserve their human nature and privacy.

The fact of experiencing sexuality in old age cannot be a reason for embarrassment by the older adults; on the contrary, it must be taken into account that this phase of life leads to a decrease in libido and female sex hormones, which can cause decreased sexual desire and not limit their desires and will in relation to sexuality.

Discussion

The reduction in the number of sexuality experiences in the older adults was mentioned in nine studies (A2, A7, A8, A9, A11, A15, A16, A17 and A18). Ribeiro, Alves and Meira²⁶ associate factors related to the reproductive system of women in old age with the decrease in the pattern of sexual activity, justified by the climacteric, due to the failure of the ovarian function, with decreased steroid production and absence of ovulation, as well as that reduced libido is attributed, among other factors, to vaginal atrophy, loss of roughness and reduction of vaginal secretion, causing dyspareunia and decreased sensation of pleasure.

Alencar et al.²⁷ add that the elderly woman's bodily and psychological changes can generate dissatisfaction with her own body image, reflecting on the non-acceptance of herself, generating the refusal to experience sexuality.

Of the studies evaluated, five (A2, A7, A8, A9 and A12) reported that elderly women associate sexuality with the sexual act itself, that is, coitus. Bastos et al.²⁸ and Vieira, Coutinho and Saraiva¹ associate this finding due to its characteristic of a physiological function, failing to consider other means of expression of sexuality, such as expressions of affection, fondness, tenderness and companionship.

The existence of preconceptions regarding the experience of sexuality associated with aging by the older adults themselves, their families, and society was presented by nine studies (A2, A6, A7, A8, A9, A10, A11, A15 and A16). In this sense, Almeida and Lourenço²⁹ related these preconceptions to stereotypes of unattractive physical appearance, lack of interest and sensitivity to sexual stimuli, as well as to lack of information, which lead to pessimistic attitudes.

Society categorizes this period of life as asexual, with prejudice against the elderly woman herself and her family, which does not tolerate the maintenance of loving relationships among their older adults, with children being the first to deny their parents' sexuality, associating sexuality with a sign of dementia³⁰.

Unsafe sexual experiences and practices, especially related to not using condoms, making women more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, were presented in three studies (A3, A4 and A7).

Low adherence to condom use can be related to the absence of this prevention device in the act of sexual practice by the older adults, or to lack of dexterity in its use, causing slowness, which, in the older adult's view, can hinder the intimate occasion. Especially in relation to women in old age, the arguments are related to the lack of concern with contraception, difficulty in negotiation between partners, as well as to the trust established between marriage and a stable relationship, assuming that they can give up condom use during sexual relations, generating greater vulnerability to STD/HIV infections³¹⁻³³.

Dornelas Neto et al³⁶ add that the increase in exposure to risky situations due to divorce cases and to widowhood, the search for sexual partners on social networks and websites and the increase in sex tourism/trade, as well as the physiological changes resulting from the aging process, can contribute to the increased risk of vulnerability to STDs/HIV.

Cezar, Aires and Paz³⁵ emphasize the importance of developing public health programs aimed specifically at the older adults, in order to clarify doubts related to sexuality and the prevention of STDs, allowing them to adopt healthier and safer practices related to the experience of sexuality, mainly with the scenario where there is an increase in life expectancy³⁶.

The continuity of sexual practices conceived as an obligation of marriage and not out of desire was pointed out by two studies (A9, A12). Ferreira et al.³⁷ revealed that women maintain sexual relations due to their obligation as wives/partners and have the understanding that if they do not fulfill their obligation, the husband/partner will seek this satisfaction in sexual relationships or practices outside of marriage, as well as Berger³⁸ reports that the adults justify the importance of sexual intercourse to maintain their partner.

The existence of the oppressive culture of society and the family in relation to the experience of sexuality in elderly women was pointed out by four studies (A7, A10, A11 and A16). Baldissera and Bueno³⁹ reveal that they had difficulties in approaching the theme of sexuality, because in the speech of elderly women there are taboos and myths, as well as the social representation of not talking about sex, as a socially constructed practice.

Most of the elderly women are ashamed to assume that they have an active sex life, mainly because family and society discourage them, and the media exhibits the experience of sexuality by the older adults as pejorative⁴⁰.

Regarding the positive factors for the experience of sexuality, the maintenance of active sexuality by elderly women is pointed out as a positive aspect for the experience of sexuality by four studies (A5, A7, A12, A14). This appreciation is also presented by Correia et al.⁴¹, who relate general well-being to satisfactory sexual health, and consider it an important and fundamental factor for quality of life. Elderly women recognize that the experience of sexuality provides physical and psychological well-being, and contributes to the reduction of physical and mental health problems associated with aging⁴².

The experience of sexuality associated with affective and emotional involvement was presented by six studies (A1, A5, A13, A15, A17, A18). Vieira, Coutinho and Saraiva¹ denote that this experience of pleasure

will only be achieved if there is affection in the relationship, involving caresses, touch, complicity, feelings and intimacy during sexual intercourse, going beyond the simple act.

Sexuality is not restricted to sexual intercourse, but it understands the interaction between affectivity, genitality, interpersonal relationship, a set of behaviors and feelings, requiring contact, intimacy and affection, being a language and means of expression of the human being, essential for the physical and emotional well-being of the older adults⁴².

Conclusion

With this study it was possible to show that the reduction or inexistence of moments involving sexuality among the adults and the causes can be related mainly to the association with the sexual act, to physical disability, to changes in body image, and to the pathologies developed in the aging process. The existence of preconceptions, myths and social taboos regarding the experience of sexuality and the concept of asexuality of elderly women prevents the fullness of sexuality, as well as the oppressive culture that exists in society.

A worrying factor was the finding of unsafe sexual experiences and practices, especially related to not using condoms, making elderly women more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases. The limitations of the study include the scarcity of research studies carried out at the national level with a focus on the sexuality of the older adults.

However, strategies aimed at promoting and preventing the health of elderly women must address this theme, aiming at the understanding by elderly women that sexuality involves more than the simple sexual act, but also affection and emotions, making their experience healthier in the face of the physical and psychological benefits provided, which can directly reflect on the quality of life of women in old age.

Author contributions

Chagas RSP participated in the conception, design, search and statistical analysis of the research data, interpretation of results, and writing of the scientific article. Cecchetto FH participated in the orientation, research data collection, data interpretation, and writing. Riegel F participated in the conception, design, interpretation of results, and writing of the scientific article.

Competing interests

No financial, legal or political conflicts involving third parties (government, companies and private foundations, etc.) have been declared for any aspect of the submitted paper (including, but not limited to, grants and funding, participation in advisory council, study design, preparation of manuscript, statistical analysis, etc.).

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