

Menopause, Aging and the Sexual Female

***Warning, this article contains sexually graphic terminology in a medical context.***

*Note:* This series has been addressing some specific questions about physical intimacy that I get asked a lot at my conferences but which need a true expert to answer. I think Dr Townsend's final piece in this series will be helpful to many but part of that helpfulness involves being a bit more, um, 'specific' in her advice, and that meant more adult content and language than I was comfortable with on a blog feed! :-). This article addresses some of the challenges that menopause may bring for sexual intimacy. So we have posted it in our Resources section.

*As I'm on the road speaking to women's groups, men's groups and groups of married couples, I get a lot of questions about sex and intimacy that relate to my research but aren't directly addressed. Since I'm not a counselor, I don't necessarily know the answers to some of these specialized questions. So I went looking for answers from a group of recognized experts I highly respect. This article is one of a series. –Shaunti*

Margaret has been married for 32 years to her high school sweetheart. She loves all aspects of being married but has noticed in the past few months when she and her husband make love that her vagina “feels very sore.” The pain is so bad that she tries to avoid any activity that might lead to sex. He has noticed that she rarely interacts with him but when he asks her about it she says that everything is “fine.” She learned as a child not to talk about personal things and finds it quite difficult to discuss her pain. Her last period was 2 years ago when she was 50. She is not taking any over-the-counter or prescription medications. When she discusses the pain with her physician, she learns one of the most common complaints of women who have gone through menopause is pain during sex.

### **Perimenopause and Menopause**

The ovaries begin to produce less estrogen when women are in their forties. This time period is called perimenopause. During this time a woman may notice that her periods are irregular. Fertility and the chance of pregnancy decrease. However, if pregnancy is not desired it is important to continue using birth control for at least one year after the last period. Unfortunately, some women have significant problems with the hormone fluctuations and may experience severe hot flashes, irritability, anxiety, sleep disruption, vaginal dryness, and pain during sex. Women are encouraged to seek medical attention for help with severe symptoms. Menopause begins 12 months after a woman's last period. This generally occurs around the age of 50 but may occur much earlier or later.

One of the most common sexual complaints of perimenopausal and menopausal women is pain during intercourse. During perimenopause and menopause, the diminishing estrogen levels cause vaginal tissue to become thin. Vaginal secretions also decrease. These changes can result in pain and bleeding during intercourse.

It is important to learn as much as you can about what is happening to your body by reading books and articles and discussing this issue with your doctor.

Two resources include:

<http://www.webmd.com/menopause/guide/menopause-symptoms-types>

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/menopause/DS00119/DSECTION=symptoms>

### **Specific Suggestions**

After menopause, pain during intercourse can be severe. Fortunately, there are many things that help. Make sure you and your spouse spend extended periods of time touching and kissing each other before trying to have sex. Start out by cuddling and kissing each other and letting passion slowly build. Look fondly into each other's eyes. Softly share what you like about the other. Stroke hands, face and back with soft, slow, sensuous touches. Make sure to use plenty of silicone-based or water-based lubricant [read labels to determine ingredients] to the area outside your vagina and your husband's penis prior to making love. Your local drug store should have a variety to choose from or you can order lubricants online. It can be quite an adventure to try new brands! Some brands are KY, Astroglide, Probe Personal Lubricant, and Firefly Organics. Avoid using glycerin based lubricants. These types of lubricants can irritate and contribute to vaginal infections. Also avoid using lubricants that are designed to warm tissue or improve sensation—they can increase pain. If the lubricant gets gluey during sex, add more lubricant or dip your fingers into a glass of water and sprinkle some water on the area with your fingers [keep a glass near the bed for this]. No matter what lubricant you use, make sure you wash off any lingering lubricant after making love with warm water and unscented soap. Another tip is to use an over-the-counter hydrating product such as Replens. These products are not intended to be used during sex; rather they are inserted into the vagina on a regular basis to provide ongoing moisture to the vagina. Some women might want to ask their physicians about a prescription for estrogen replacement. Women with estrogen sensitive breast cancers might not be a candidate for replacement estrogen. Some breast cancer survivors have found thicker oils such as Crisco or Vitamin E oil useful as lubricants. If one of these is used, put a towel under your hips so you don't stain bedding. Also, don't use these oil based lubricants with condoms—doing so may cause the condom to tear. Don't forget to gently wash lingering oils off your genitals with soap and water after making love. Another important tip is to make love on a regular and frequent basis. Making love improves blood flow to your sexual organs and nourishes vaginal tissue and helps prevent/decrease pain during sex.

It is important to focus on making healthy choices that help with sexual wellness. These choices include: eating a quality diet, regular exercise, avoiding nicotine and alcohol, drinking enough clean water to produce light straw colored urine, and eating enough fiber to produce regular soft, formed, bowel movements. Eating a quality diet that is low in salt, sugar and fat contributes to overall health and sexual health. The US government suggests older adults participate in moderate intensity exercise 150 minutes a week. This builds strong hearts and muscles; both are important in sexual health. An easy way to start exercise is walking—all you need is a pair of shoes and a place to walk. Exercises to strengthen the pelvic muscles can be helpful in improving blood flow, sensation, and muscle tone and helps reduce sexual pain. These exercises include Kegels, Pilates and Barre. Information on these exercises can be found online, on YouTube, on DVD's and at most sporting goods stores. By developing and following a plan to

be healthy, you can decrease pain and avoid many of the chronic illnesses that are common after menopause and contribute to other sexual problems.

One frequently overlooked strategy to help with sexual pain is learning to relax. For a woman, sexual arousal is dependent upon the body's ability to relax. When we relax, the blood vessels that bring blood to sexual parts enlarge, this helps the body get ready for sex. Remember being aroused sexually prior to starting to have intercourse helps prevent pain. Additionally, it is common to tighten muscles in fear of or in response to pain—this tightening causes the vagina to narrow, resulting in an increase in sexual pain. Relaxation decreases muscle tension and pain. Many people find listening to quiet music, focusing their thoughts on positive memories, and/or taking slow deep breaths helpful. Other people use specific relaxation techniques such as muscle relaxation exercises [examples can be found on iTunes and YouTube—check under “Muscle Relaxation”].

Make sure you check out the WebMD and Mayo Clinic internet sites suggested in paragraph 3. These sites have specific suggestions for some of the other issues that occur after your periods have stopped. You don't have to endure perimenopausal and/or menopausal symptoms, there are many solutions available.

In conclusion, talk with your spouse, seek medical help, and research your symptoms. Remember menopause is a natural part of life and is not an illness. Try new things, look for solutions and do what works for you. Stop doing what does not work. Plan ahead and make it your goal to live well and purposefully. Many women report that the best time of their lives occurred after menopause. They have learned to live life fully and righteously using wisdom learned over their lifetime.

“Silver hair is a beautiful crown found in a righteous life”

Proverbs 16:31 GOD'S WORD® Translation

## Reference

Roseau, D., Childerston, J., & Childerston, C. (2004). A celebration of sex after fifty. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

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