

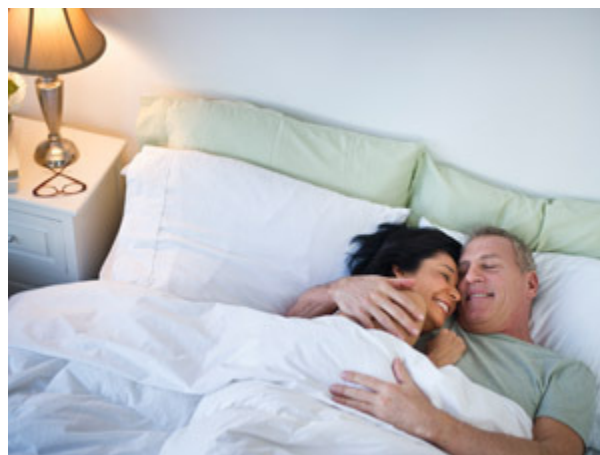


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myths about sex after 40

Learn why over the hill doesn't mean your sex life's over

By Denise Schipani



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Forty may be the new 30, but considering the misconceptions about women's sexuality and desirability after a "certain age," you'd think 40 was the new 80! Whether you blame advertising portrayals of what's "sexy" (Victoria's Secret models, anyone?), or the fact that leading TV and movie roles turn more to the matronly than the hot as actresses age, myths about a more mature women's sexuality abound. "We silently believe that only young people have sex," says Maureen McGrath, RN, a **sex-health educator and radio host**. But that couldn't be further from the

truth. Here, eight myths we're happy to dispel for you.

Myth 1: You don't need sex as you get older.

Truth: It's hard to redefine what the need for sex is after you're done baby-making. And sure, you won't *die* without sex; it's not food or water. But that doesn't mean you need it any less than other things that bring joy, satisfaction and better emotional and physical health. "Sex gets blood flowing, which brings nutrients to all parts of your body and

eliminates waste. Heart pumping, deep breathing—it's all good for you," says **Carmella Sebastian, MD**, a women's wellness and sexuality expert.

Myth 2: Those extra pounds make you undesirable.

Truth: Repeat after us: Enjoying sex isn't about how you look, but how you *feel*. "You can have inner confidence at any weight," says McGrath. That said, if you're not feeling your best, go for a brisk, 30-minute walk with your partner rather than have another helping of pasta at dinner. And try to quash that inner monologue that's telling you men don't find less-than-perfect bodies sexy. Ask any guy: If the woman who shares his bed gets naked, he's not seeing a muffin top and cellulite. He's seeing *naked*. If you're single now and worried that a new lover won't find you desirable, forget that too. "Your lumps, bumps and wrinkles mean nothing to 99% of men over 40," says Bobbi Palmer, founder and CEO of **Date Like a Grownup**. "What you lack in firmness you more than make up in humor, compassion and experience. Plus, you know your body better than you ever did in your 20s." All those years living in your skin has taught you what turns you on that you just didn't know two decades ago. And what's sexier to a man than a woman who knows what she wants in bed?

Myth 3: Your body isn't sexual once you enter perimenopause.

Truth: The changes that occur in the (sometimes) years before menopause, such as irregular periods, mood changes and lack of vaginal lubrication will affect your sex life. But a changing body is still a sexual body, says Dr. Sebastian, and recognizing that is important. Avoiding sexual activity may only worsen things. Take dryness: Using a lubricant such as KY Jelly helps, but so does the act of having sex: "When blood goes to the genitals, the tissues remain healthy," encouraging natural lubrication. Hot flashes and fatigue associated with perimenopause can wreak havoc on your energy levels, says McGrath, so talk to your doctor about possible hormonal remedies. And look on the bright side: This can be a time of experimentation and freedom with sex that you didn't have when young kids were underfoot. "Introduce a vibrator, experiment with self-stimulation, try new positions," suggests McGrath.

Myth 4: You're too tired for sex.

Truth: This one persists for good reason—it makes sense that you'd be more worn-out now than you were 20 years ago. But it's more likely that "I'm too tired" is an excuse to avoid sex. Being chronically out of energy can trigger a sex drive dip, so ask your doctor to check your thyroid levels and test you for anemia, says McGrath. And look at your lifestyle:

Maybe you need to pare down your commitments and get better sleep by regulating your bedtime and removing un-sexy (and rest-interfering) TVs and computers from your bedroom. Other than that, "don't wait to have sex until the end of the day when you're exhausted," says Dr. Sebastian. If you're a morning person, try a little wake-up nookie, or if possible, a bit of afternoon delight.

Myth 5: You don't have to worry about birth control.

Truth: Tell that to the legion of late-life moms toting their beloved "oops" babies! "It's hard to know exactly when you'll stop ovulating, even if you're in the middle of perimenopause," says Dr. Sebastian. "To check when you can skip protection, your doctor can do a blood test." The level of follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) in your blood can reveal whether you're still fertile, but levels fluctuate during perimenopause, so even a low FSH level may be misleading. That's why it's better to be safe than sorry. Menopause isn't official until you've gone a full year without a period, says McGrath. In a new relationship? You still have to protect against sexually transmitted diseases, so use condoms until you're sure about your partner's past.

Myth 6: It's normal for sex drive to drop as you age.

Truth: Actually, it may be the opposite. "It's more likely for younger women to experience dips in libido," says McGrath, probably thanks to the hormonal upheavals of pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and dealing with young children. So if you have little or no desire for any kind of sex—even with George Clooney in your fantasies—see your doctor to be sure you don't have a medical condition, such as thyroid issues or certain cancers, says Dr. Sebastian. Beyond that, libido has a lot to do with how easily you can talk to your partner, and how bothered either of you is by how often you have sex. For one couple, once a month feels fine, whereas for others three times a week is practically nothing. "Figure out how much sex is enough before you decide you have a libido problem," says McGrath.

Myth 7: Things that once turned you on no longer work because of your age.

Truth: "This is more a fact of a long relationship than aging," says McGrath. You might be bored or in a rut (and so might your man), so address it as soon as possible, advises Dr. Sebastian. Get a video, buy a book, shake things up. Have a whole range of moves in your sexual arsenal because different things turn you on not just in different stages of life but on different days!

Myth 8: If I've never had great orgasms, it's too late now.

Truth: This is easy to debunk, says Dr. Sebastian, who admits, "I was never multi-orgasmic until after I had my second child." She attributes the change to a newfound sense of self-confidence, an ability to start asking for what she wanted in bed. Are you stressed? Did you have a fight with your spouse? Did you recently get a promotion at work and are feeling good about yourself? These all can affect your ability to climax. It's never too late to explore what turns you on, says McGrath. "People think they're born knowing how to be a great lover, but it has to be learned."

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