

“I don’t know where to find information...” “i am embarrassed to ask my doctor...” barriers to older adults’ sexual health access

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Background:

Older adults are rarely the focus of sexual health research, services, or health promotion. While not all older Australians are sexually active or interested in sex, many are, and may require information and healthcare to support their sexual wellbeing. Currently, older adults do not have equitable access to sexual health information and services and may experience discrimination when seeking support.

Methods:

We conducted a survey in 2021 to explore gaps in sexual health promotion for Australians over 60. 1470 participants throughout Australia responded, with males and females equally represented and with a median age of 69 years. In response to the optional question “What barriers can make it difficult for you to address sexual health and wellbeing issues in your life?”, 732 free-text responses were gathered, varying in length from one word to several sentences. Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Results:

Participants spoke of a number of barriers to their sexual wellbeing with the key themes being *relational challenges* e.g. difficulty communicating with a partner about sex, *healthcare barriers* e.g. being too embarrassed to broach sexual concerns with a GP, *personal challenges* e.g. shame about an STI diagnosis, *physical limitations* e.g. chronic conditions affecting sexual functioning, and *access gaps* e.g. not knowing where to find information on sexual topics.

Conclusion:

Participants’ quotes illuminate sexual health and wellbeing challenges faced by older Australians. For older adults to enjoy their right to healthy and pleasurable sexual lives, we need to see improved access to relevant sexual health information and healthcare that is more supportive of older patients’ sexual concerns. While navigating sexual matters can be awkward at any age, ageism and assumptions that older adults are not (or should not) be interested in sex underpin some of these barriers.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.