

Dr Ciara Kelly: How to enjoy sex when you're an older and bolder fifty-something

Older and bolder: sex lives of fiftysomethings



Ciara Kelly

If 50 is the new 30 - and according to the recent Tilda study on ageing in Ireland, it pretty much is - then surely fiftysomethings, whose kids are now old enough to be half way to independence and whose finances appear to be in better shape than the rest of us, must be gadding about.

I often look with envy through the windows of restaurants at couples in their fifties who appear to have it all: time, money and enough youth on their side to be able to really enjoy life, love and all that goes with it.

Except if you're in your fifties, the truth is for both men and women that your sex life often dries up - with about a third of men experiencing erectile dysfunction and literally all menopausal women experiencing vaginal dryness and indeed a thinning of the structures of the vulva making sex difficult and often less pleasurable for both sexes.

Erectile dysfunction is mainly overcome by medication akin to Viagra that improves blood flow to the penis, thus restoring a man's ability to get or maintain an erection. But for menopausal women the issue can be less straightforward.

And a few abortive attempts at sex often put people off, as they would rather not try again than risk the awkward humiliation of it not quite working out.

But sex is important in life and in relationships. So what can you do as a woman to continue to enjoy sex, now that you might actually have time to have it?

Well, first up, don't even attempt to have sex without a good lubricant. Lube prevents you from becoming chafed or sore and can also add a certain playful aspect to sex - so steer clear of cold clinical gels that make you feel like you're about to have a smear test and instead go for nice oil-based lubes that (although they are incompatible with condoms) are much kinder to and offer far better lubrication for the mature couple.

Lubes such as YES OB come in a variety of pleasant scents and flavours such as vanilla, and are rich and buttery, suitable for middle age and available online.

Second up, oestrogen in the form of vaginal pessaries can restore moisture and volume or plumpness to the vulval area by a local application of hormone, which can improve sex dramatically, reducing soreness and making sex much more pleasurable.

These have less side-effects than full blown HRT and little effect on other menopausal symptoms, but they are very helpful sexually.

Regular HRT can also be used to improve your sex life.

It's mainly used to reduce the debilitating vasomotor symptoms of the menopause such as the flushing and sweating, but it will also help with vaginal dryness and sexual issues. You should discuss with your GP whether or not it's suitable for you.

Sexual positions are also important in mature sex lives. The woman on top allows her to control and direct penetration and so can be more comfortable than the missionary position, for example.

And of course - as with sex at all ages - foreplay and clitoral stimulation for women is extremely important if it's to be an enjoyable experience for both parties. Oh, and for those body-conscious middle agers, I suggest wearing something that drapes over the bits you don't like and - if that's not enough - just turn the lights out.

The truth is, sex gets a little bit trickier for those in their fifties, but most of the hurdles can be overcome with a little help and imagination - if golf isn't your thing...