



## OPINION

By Kate Lister

i columnist

# It's time to give the safe sex talk to your grandparents

There is a hell of a lot of silver sex going on, and not always safely

July 30, 2024 11:00 am





Research shows it's not so much that people aren't aware of safe sex, but that they don't see themselves as being in any danger of infection (Photo: Steve Morgan)

Never mind having the safe sex talk with your teenager, have you considered having it with your parents and grandparents? You might have to. According to the latest **research**, rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) rose in the US by 23.8 per cent in the over-65s and by 16.2 per cent in those aged 55 to 64 between 2020 and 2023, whereas STIs have actually started declining in under-25s. A US **Centres for Disease Control and Prevention** (CDC) report found rates of chlamydia, gonorrhoea, and syphilis among US adults aged 55 and older have more than doubled over the past 10 years. Doubled!

If you are reading these statistics and thinking, well, that's America and they have nicer weather there, think again. In **England**, 31,902 new STIs were recorded in the over 45s in 2015, and this increased to 37,692 in 2019 – a jump of 18 per cent. The rates of STIs among older adults in Europe is now of such a concern it was the focus of a research review presented at this year's European Congress of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases.

And it's not just Europe and America. STIs are on the rise in older adults all around the world, including China, Korea, Australia, Kenya and Botswana. It doesn't matter where you look, **there is a hell of a lot of silver sex going on**, and not always safely! So, you

really need to make sure someone has had the condom chat with grandma.

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Whenever stories like this emerge in the press, there is usually an undercurrent of surprise that older people are sexually active at all. Earlier this year, the care home provider **KYN** released a survey into age and sex, and found that 37 per cent of respondents over 70 said that they didn't feel represented in the media.

In fact, ageism is so prevalent in our society, I believe that our entire idea of what an older person *is* requires reassessing. For example, if you use the same age metrics as most scientific **research** does, then someone aged 65 years or older is often referred to as “elderly”. That just doesn't seem elderly to me. For reference, Madonna, Sharon Stone, Angela Bassett, and Denzel Washington are all 65 years old, or over. And may I remind you that Brad Pitt is 60? Johnny Depp is 61! This is hardly the generation of Vera Lyn and ration books.

Someone turning 80 in 2024 would have been born in 1944, meaning they were 25 years old when the Woodstock festival opened, and even if they didn't actually attend, they're still younger than every member of The Rolling Stones, who are still touring. This generation is far more likely to be singing “Sympathy for the Devil” than “It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary”.

Of course it's not surprising that this generation are still sexually active. But here is the question I am really hung up on: do higher rates of STIs mean that older people are having more sex than ever before? And if that's true, why should this be the case? What is it about this generation? Could it be that older people are having as much sex as ever, but no one thought to ask them about it until now?

One person who has built a career asking older people about their sex lives is **Professor Sharron Hinchliff**, who led the UK's first research programme on sex and the elderly, looking at the barriers to the sexual rights of older people. She also designed the UK's first public health website that supports healthy sexual ageing, [AgeSexandYou.com](https://www.agesexandyou.com). So, if anyone can tell me what is going on with the older generation, it's Professor Hinchliff.

Firstly, are infection rates really on the rise in this demographic? Professor Hinchliff confirmed they are. "New diagnoses of STIs in the over 50s in the UK have been on the increase for some time," she said. "This mirrors other areas across the globe, for example California, China, Australia. The most dominant STIs in the UK at the moment are syphilis and gonorrhoea."

But does this mean that older people are having more sex than previous generations? Yes, they are, and according to Professor Hinchliff, there are a few reasons for this.

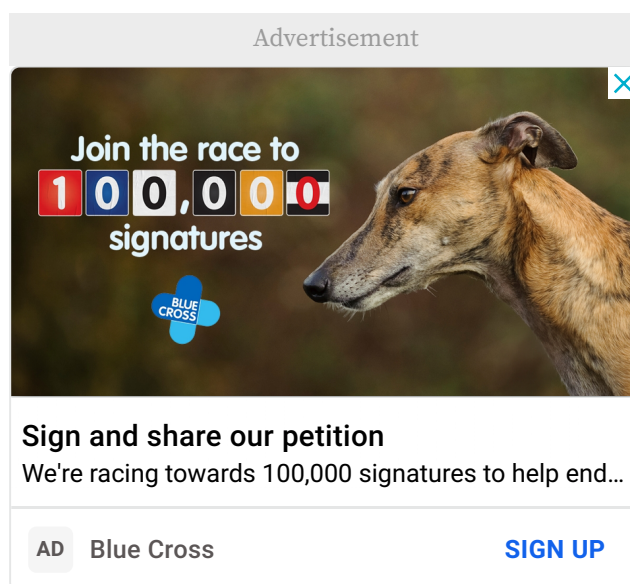
"Older adults are sexually active," she explained, "but now their sexual partners may be more diverse. So, someone may have been in a heterosexual relationship for decades and move onto another type of sexual relationship when they're older." At the moment, the rates for gonorrhoea in the over 45s are highest among bisexual men and men who have sex with men. Given the impressive work that has been done to normalise LGBTQ relationships over the past 50 years (in no small part by older people), it shouldn't surprise anyone that it isn't just the young who are more open to embracing queer experiences.

Then, of course, there has been the effects of the digital revolution. For Professor Hinchliff this has been key in changing the sex lives of older people. It's made it easier

for all of us to meet and hook up. “Relationships break down, and there are easier ways to meet partners, for sex and/or relationships these days. I’m thinking of dating apps and other types of social media.” That also makes perfect sense – dating apps have made it considerably easier to meet prospective bed mates.

I put all of this to “senior sexpert” **Joan Price**, 81, who is an author and advocate for ageless sexuality. She has been writing and speaking about senior sex since 2005, offering everything from practical sex tips to workshops on how to navigate sex after grief. If you needed a walking, talking advertisement for having good sex in your older years, Joan is it. She is literally glowing. To quote *When Harry Met Sally*, “I’ll have what she’s having.” Joan’s work has also shown her that her generation is more open to sexual experimentation than their forbearers were.

But if that is the case, why hasn’t this translated to better knowledge around safe sex?



Joan explained: “Many more single, widowed, and non-monogamous seniors are embracing their sexuality and exploring new sexual connections than at any time in our history. Unfortunately, their upbeat and updated acceptance of sex doesn’t always include barrier protection.”

Poor sexual education and stigma around sex, not to mention condom use, back in the day have all played their part in the baby boomers struggling to embrace safe sex today. Today, schoolchildren can practice putting condoms on cucumbers, but it wasn’t so long ago that you could only buy them under the counter with a wink and a “something for

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KATE LISTER

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the weekend, sir?”

Joan works very hard to confront any sense of “shame and embarrassment about insisting on condoms with a new partner, especially if the partner resists”. She told me that, “I recommend telling a new partner some version of, ‘I require condoms with everyone, every time. This is my policy. It’s sex with a condom – or no sex.’ But it doesn’t have to be a downer! You can eroticise condom use, make it part of the tease of the sex play. Learn to put the condom on your partner – with your mouth!” All fabulous advice.

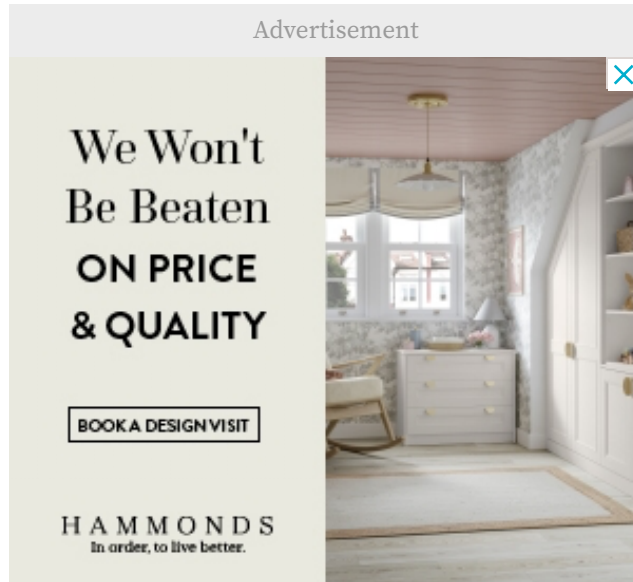
Professor Hinchcliff has also been researching why older people aren’t always practising safe sex, and her work shows it’s not so much that people aren’t aware of safe sex, but that they don’t see themselves as being in any danger of infection. “Our research has found that older adults have good awareness of STIs but tend not to see themselves as at risk even when they don’t know their new partner’s sexual history.”

This tallies with emerging [research](#) that shows those of us in middle age and older have a bad habit of assessing a sexual partner’s health on the basis on their appearance, personal hygiene, social status, friendship group, etc. “Nigel can’t have syphilis! He’s wearing Armani loafers, for goodness’ sake.” That kind of thing. So, it seems denial is a significant factor in all this, but it’s not the only issue in play.

Professor Hinchcliff continued: “Other reasons include no longer having a risk of pregnancy, so why bother with a condom? And, if someone has come out of a long-term relationship, then there’s a good chance they haven’t had to practise safer sex for a long time.”


Then there is good old-fashioned ageism. We live in a highly visual culture and when sex is depicted to us, in advertisements, TV, and film, it is firmly connected with young people. Even sexual health promotion campaigns are largely aimed at young people, all of which obscures the sexuality of older adults.





But we have to challenge the outdated and damaging assumption that older people are not sexual, because of course they are! This is the generation who spearheaded the sexual revolution of the 1960s. However, there is evidently still a lot of work to do for older people to feel that the conversations around safe sex apply to them every bit as much as they do to Gen Z.

Part of that work requires all of us to stop desexualising older people and to challenge the narrative that sex is only for the young. As Joan always asks in her training workshops: “At what age do you imagine you will become sexless? How old do you think you will be when you stop enjoying flirting, touch, and orgasms?”

If we are lucky, we will get to be an older person. If we are very lucky, we will get to be an older person with a spectacular sex life. 

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