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Sportiness and bisexuality linked to more lifetime sexual partners for older women

Similar patterns in men associated with income and same sex preference

Older women who are sporty or bisexual are more likely to have notched up a higher than average number of lifetime sexual partners, reveals research published in **BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health**.

While both sexes share some social, demographic, and behavioural factors in common, among older men, same sex preference and income seem to be highly influential, the findings indicate.

Research on sexual behaviour and associated health risks has tended to focus on teens and young people, rather than older age groups, say the researchers.

In a bid to plug this knowledge gap, the researchers drew on a nationally representative sample of 3054 men and 3867 women aged 50 and above to explore the factors associated with the numbers of sexual partners they had had.

The older adults were part of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, which has been tracking the health and wellbeing of those aged 50+ since 2002 by means of annual surveys and face to face interviews.

The data for the current study included responses to the Sexual Relationships and Activities Questionnaire, which 7079 people completed in 2012-13. Some 6921 of them specified the numbers of sexual partners they had had.

Information on ethnicity, marital status, household income, sexual orientation, health and lifestyle—the frequency and quantity of smoking, drinking, and physical activity—was also gathered.

Men were more likely than women to report a higher number of lifetime sexual partners: just under 40 per cent of the men and around one in four (24%) of the women had had at least five sexual partners.

Around one in five men, but fewer than one in 10 women (8.5%), had had 10 or more.

The lifetime number of sexual partners in both sexes was independently associated with younger age, marital/partner status (separated/divorced; single/never married), and regular drinking and smoking.

But there were some differences between the sexes, including sexual orientation. Bisexuality in women and homosexuality in men were independently associated with a higher number of lifetime sexual partners.

And among women, white ethnicity and doing regular moderate to intensive exercise were also associated with a higher number of sexual partners, as was the absence of a longstanding illness.

For men, income seemed to be a key influence, with those in the bottom 20 per cent of income and those in the top 20 per cent both reporting higher numbers of lifetime sexual partners.

That older men have more sexual partners than older women echoes findings in younger age groups, and might reflect higher testosterone levels, societal 'double standards' towards women's sexual behaviour, or that men are more likely than women to talk about their sexual conquests, suggest the researchers.

And it isn't clear why women of white ethnicity reported a higher number of sexual partners than women from other ethnic backgrounds, or why this racial disparity didn't apply to men, they add.

This is an observational study, and as such, can't establish cause. The findings also rely on personal recall which may not always be accurate.

But, say the researchers, theirs is the first study to identify sociodemographic and behavioural factors linked to the number of lifetime sexual partners in an age group that has often been left out of this type of research.

"This information may help health practitioners to identify individuals who are at greatest risk of [sexually transmitted infections] and their associated health complications over the life course," suggest the researchers.

"Moreover, findings from the present study could also benefit younger adults through targeted interventions to educate groups at risk of having a high number of sexual partners about the risks associated with doing so, and the practice of safe sex," they add.

Notes for editors