



# SEX IN & AFTER MENOPAUSE

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*Freddy Carrick*

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Now I'm at this beautiful post-menopausal age, having a fulfilling intimate relationship is as good as breathing deeply, it's relaxing and satisfying. It makes my eyes glow and I'm more relaxed, physically. It doesn't matter that my body isn't what it was and my wrinkles hang proudly when I'm on top, my partner has aged as well, so we're even.

And, I have to say that solo sex is every bit as good, different, but good. In a tired or busy life, pleasing yourself is lovely, quick and very satisfying.

Intimacy isn't always about sex, and having sex is not necessarily intimate. Huh? Let's use the word intercourse instead of sex because that word defines what most of us think of when we discuss sex. When you had your first full relationship where intercourse happened regularly, did you think that gentle touching and tender voices were sexy or intimate? Did you think it was important to be intimate, or was being sexy all that mattered?

The difference is subtle but important and I'll tell you why. I have a dear friend who has been married over 40 years and she told me recently that she still loves her husband "like a fool, and can't get enough of him". When I'm with her and her partner, I feel loved as well, because they are so generous with their loving that everyone else shares it. I've been in the company of other couples who can excite each other with just a look, a smile or a gentle touch; this is intimacy. It's the shared joke, shared history, shared plans and dreams. It's feeling total trust that your partner will never hurt you, (especially with words) so that you become more and more open to your real authentic self, which helps the trust between you to grow even greater. You can feel beloved just because your partner strokes your shoulder as they walk past.

However, when you lack personal confidence it's easy to slip out of sexy and into self-judgement. You can become anxious about your rolls of fat or facial wrinkles or skin texture on your bum and thighs, or whatever is your personal hang-up. Judging yourself this way is sure to kill the vibe of intimacy. Once you believe that you're not good enough, you'll subconsciously pass that belief onto your partner and open the door for a level of behaviour from them that is less than you should accept. Not every partner will take advantage of that, but it's human/animal nature that whenever anyone puts themselves into a position of subservience, the other will rise higher.

Ok, so we all know that having a loving and fulfilling sexual relationship is optimum in a long-term relationship, but what happens when that isn't what you get, or when your relationship changes and intimacy goes out of the door.

For many women around peri menopause onwards, this part of loving can be the last item on the list of things to do. Planning to have children in her thirties means

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---

having teenagers who need extra emotional support just when Mum is living through her own hormonal tornado. Add into this a career that needs to continue, on financial grounds or because she loves her work, elderly parents who need some support, oh, and finally, a partner who doesn't really understand where his woman disappeared to.

Dr Annie Evans, a Consultant Gynaecologist at Bristol Royal Infirmary says:

"In my practice I think if somebody doesn't have a problem with libido, that's much more unusual than somebody who does. It's a normal reaction. There's no point giving someone HRT if she's still being over-burdened at home and sleeping less than six hours a night because she's got so many commitments. In that case there needs to be a frank discussion and she needs to get help from family members, friends or however she can," Anne said. Despite this, there's still stigma attached to it. "If there's been good sex within a marriage and then women hit peri-menopause, sexual interest is often the first thing to go and unfortunately many women feel there's a blame attached to that. She feels guilty and her partner may blame them because he's still very keen to have sex. A generation, certainly two generations ago, women wouldn't expect to be sexually active at 60 and beyond - their life expectancy was much less. Now, women spend a third of their life beyond the menopause. A woman in her 50s, 60s and beyond would expect to be in a sexually active relationship," she said.

Apart from situational reasons why you no longer have sex within your relationship, experiencing pain from intercourse will certainly put you off. If you do feel pain, you should gallop off to your doctor to check the symptoms. Fibroids in the uterus or vagina are fairly common and could be the cause of your pain. However, when your doctor rules out the need for further investigation you could begin a conversation around a remedy which he can prescribe.

The pain you might feel is usually caused because when the supply of oestrogen is reduced by the body, the protective lining in the vagina can dry out, leaving patches of thinner and more sensitive skin. There is a product called Vagifem (may have different names in other countries) containing a tiny amount of body-identical oestrogen which can be applied into the vagina as a gel, a tiny tablet, or in a doughnut shaped ring which is inserted manually. This oestrogen is not absorbed into the main bloodstream and will have no effect on the rest of the body, nor will it have any potential to trigger breast cancer. Vagifem delivers a dose of oestrogen so tiny that you would need to use more than a year's supply, in one day, to equal the amount that would be in a daily dose of body identical oestrogen supplement. However, that dose is so mighty that it will re-balance the lining of the vagina which will replenish lost elasticity and reduce the pain.

## SEX IN & AFTER MENOPAUSE

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It has a huge extra benefit too, many women notice some bladder weakness as they go through menopause which doesn't improve post menopause. This is caused again by the reduction of oestrogen creating minor infection or irritation to the urethra and often the bladder. Using any of the applications mentioned can improve this symptom and make a massive difference to your quality of life.

As a pre-emptive measure to the use of Vagifem or its equivalent, making sure that you moisturise your vagina regularly can stop the symptom from developing. This isn't lubricating, it's moisturising, using paraben free non-perfumed products sold as 'Sylk' or 'Yes, Yes' or 'Replens'.

Conversely, there are some women who report feeling they can't get enough sex and complain their partner can't keep up with them. Hormones eh? No rhyme or reason.

Sometimes all I need to feel loved is a beautiful hug, but for a man that can often be foreplay to sex, which I find exasperating, so I teach them. One of the things I humbly regard as a service to other women is showing younger men how to hug a woman so that she feels safe and loved and supported. If it's done well, this type of hug will build a level of intimacy so that intercourse may be welcome – later – not immediately after the hug.

This is what I teach: gentlemen, your woman needs to be held in a safe embrace which has no sexual tone whatsoever. If you do this regularly and she learns that you're not just cuddling because you hope to have sex, then I promise she will soon feel safe and SHE will initiate more intimate moments. As soon as she feels any sexual undertone, or your trouser snake wakes up, she'll push you away and feel angry.

Here's how it goes:

- Open your arms and invite her in
- Think about holding a child and have the same neutral thoughts
- Stand strong and allow her to relax
- Breathe regularly but don't be heavy
- Hold her for as long as she wants to stay there, 10 seconds or five minutes
- Do not stroke, pat, or try to kiss her
- Do not twitch any muscle that might signal the end of the embrace
- When she moves to let go, let her go without kissing her, she may kiss you but that doesn't mean sex is next.

*Discover the answers to all your questions around menopause and beyond within my book *Menopause Unzipped, how to emerge as a goddess* at [www.menopauseunzipped.com](http://www.menopauseunzipped.com)*