


**KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE PRACTICE OF SEXUAL ACTIVITY IN ELDERLY PEOPLE
AS A TOOL FOR NURSING CARE: INTEGRATIVE REVIEW**

**O CONHECIMENTO SOBRE A PRÁTICA DA ATIVIDADE SEXUAL DO IDOSO COMO
FERRAMENTA PARA O CUIDADO DE ENFERMAGEM: REVISÃO INTEGRATIVA**

**CONOCIMIENTO SOBRE LA PRÁCTICA DE LA ACTIVIDAD SEXUAL EN PERSONAS
MAYORES COMO HERRAMIENTA PARA EL CUIDADO DE ENFERMERÍA: REVISIÓN
INTEGRADORA**

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify how older adults experience their sexuality in their own reality, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Method: Integrative review synthesizing evidence from various studies to identify gaps.

Results: Eleven articles were included: 10 produced in Brazil and one in Iran. Eight addressed situations experienced by older adults, and three reported on healthcare professionals' actions focused on older adults' sexuality. Sexual activity was observed to be present in older adults' lives, even in the face of physiological and health changes. Weaknesses in healthcare professionals' care were also noted.

Final considerations: Sexual activity is inherent to older adults' lives, even when faced with significant comorbidities. It is essential that healthcare professionals recognize this reality, avoiding neglecting or making sexuality invisible in later life.

Keywords: Elderly Person. Sexuality. Health Education.

RESUMO

Objetivo: identificar como os idosos vivenciam sua sexualidade em sua realidade, independentemente de sua orientação sexual.

Método: Revisão integrativa. Foram incluídos artigos completos disponíveis integralmente nas bases de dados, publicados entre 2015 e 2025, nos idiomas português, inglês e espanhol. Para a análise final resultaram 11 estudos.

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Resultados: Foram incluídos 11 artigos, 10 produzidos no Brasil e um no Irã. Oito abordavam situações vivenciadas pelos idosos e três reportavam ações de profissionais de saúde voltadas a sexualidade do idoso. Observou-se que a atividade sexual está presente na vida do idoso, mesmo frente as alterações fisiológicas e de saúde.

Considerações finais: A atividade sexual é inerente a vida dos idosos, mesmo diante de comorbidades. É fundamental que os profissionais de saúde reconheçam essa realidade, evitando negligenciar ou invisibilizar a sexualidade na fase mais avançada da vida.

Palavras-chave: Pessoa Idosa. Sexualidade. Educação em Saúde.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Identificar cómo las personas mayores experimentan su sexualidad en su propia realidad, independientemente de su orientación sexual.

Método: Revisión integrativa. Se incluyeron artículos completos disponibles en las bases de datos, publicados entre 2015 y 2025, en portugués, inglés y español. Once estudios se incluyeron en el análisis final.

Resultados: Se incluyeron once artículos: 10 producidos en Brasil y uno en Irán. Ocho abordaron situaciones vividas por personas mayores, y tres informaron sobre las acciones de profesionales de la salud centradas en la sexualidad de estas personas. Se observó que la actividad sexual está presente en la vida de las personas mayores, incluso frente a cambios fisiológicos y de salud.

Consideraciones finales: La actividad sexual es inherente a la vida de las personas mayores, incluso con comorbilidades. Es fundamental que los profesionales de la salud reconozcan esta realidad, evitando descuidar o invisibilizar la sexualidad en la edad adulta.

Palabras clave: Persona Mayor. Sexualidad. Educación para la Salud.

1 INTRODUCTION

The longevity of the population is the result of the interaction of factors: immunity, the effectiveness of political health programs aimed at controlling chronic non-communicable diseases, public investments in disease prevention and health promotion, and the growing adherence to lifestyles that favor the search for a full existence (NORONHA, 2023).

Given this scenario, it is imperative that the promotion of comprehensive care for the individual covers themes that transcend the biological aspect. The sexuality of the elderly emerges as a crucial component in this care, whose discussion cannot be limited to a merely physiological context. In this sense, Tavares et al. (2022) point out that it is essential to include the sexuality of the elderly as a curricular component in undergraduate courses in the health area. This reflects the urgency of a more holistic and thorough approach, one that recognizes the complexity and richness of the human experience in all its phases.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexuality as an intrinsic part of the human personality, a basic need that transcends coitus and orgasm. It is energy that drives the search for love, contact and intimacy, manifesting itself in feelings, movements and interactions. Sexuality influences thoughts, emotions, physical and mental health; Therefore, if health is a fundamental human right, sexual health should also be.

Aging brings about changes that affect sexual function, although sexual desire persists at all ages. The sexuality of the elderly faces prejudices and social stigmas, which mistakenly see it as exclusive to young people. This judgment suppresses the identity of the elderly, their experiences and expectations, and can generate negative implications for mental health when they feel socially prevented from experiencing their sexuality (Souza Jr et al., 2023).

The physiological changes of aging do not cancel out sexual function. Sexuality, a basic human need, must be fully experienced at all ages, including old age. However, society often neglects the active sexuality of the elderly. This invisibility, including on the part of health professionals, can lead to negative consequences, such as increasing the vulnerability of this population to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and other problems (TAVARES et al., 2022).

Sexual activity, intimacy, and relationships are crucial to the health and well-being of seniors. However, in care settings, these needs are often considered complex and are overlooked. Home care professionals are uncomfortable addressing and supporting the sexual and intimacy needs of older adults. Despite the existence of resources to meet these demands, many health professionals are unaware of or underestimate their importance.

Nurses, especially, have a lack of knowledge and lack of confidence when addressing the sexuality of the elderly. There are few educational actions and training resources available to support these professionals, which limits effective interventions. This fragility in the approach is due to the gap in the teaching of sexuality of the elderly during graduation, with the topic often being neglected or omitted in the curriculum (HORME et al., 2022).

Sexuality should be approached from a biopsychosocial perspective, considering the multiple factors that influence sexual life. This includes chronic health conditions, cognitive aspects, self-esteem and individual beliefs. Sexual self-concept is a complex psychological construct that shapes an individual's perceptions and desires about their own sexuality, directly impacting their sexual functioning (NEVE-ENTHOVEN, 2022).

Discussing the sexuality of the elderly with young people is a challenge, due to the many prejudices involved. It is essential to address sexual behavior, intimacy, sexual function, knowledge, and perceptions about the body to demystify taboos (SOUZA JR et al., 2023).

Faced with the challenge of discussing the sexuality of the elderly, it is crucial to seek an in-depth understanding of the subject. As Freire (1996) postulates, it is as important to know what already exists as it is to be able to produce new knowledge. For health professionals, especially nurses, it is essential to know and keep up to date on how the elderly experience their sexuality, regardless of sexual orientation. Understanding the various expressions of the sexual practice of the elderly globally, in an inclusive way, not only breaks prejudices, but also better prepares nurses to care for this population.

2 GOAL

Identify how the elderly experience their sexuality in their reality, regardless of their sexual orientation.

3 METHODOLOGY

This is an integrative review, which synthesizes evidence from various studies to identify gaps, suggest new studies, and provide information for health decisions. It allows a comprehensive analysis of the literature on a specific topic (GARUZI et al., 2014).

The process followed the steps: definition of the theme and research question; preparation of eligibility criteria; consultation in databases; categorization and analysis of information; evaluation of the selected studies; presentation of the results with critical analysis and synthesis (MENDES et al., 2008). The guiding question, formulated by the PICO strategy

(Elderly population, Nursing care intervention, Comparison with other professionals, Outcome), was: "how do the elderly experience their sexuality in the context of their reality, regardless of their sexual orientation?"

The databases consulted were LILACS, BDENF, MEDLINE, and PubMed. The DeCS/MeSH descriptors were "sexuality", "sexual activity", "elderly", "elderly person", "nursing care" and "nursing", combined with the Boolean operators AND and OR.

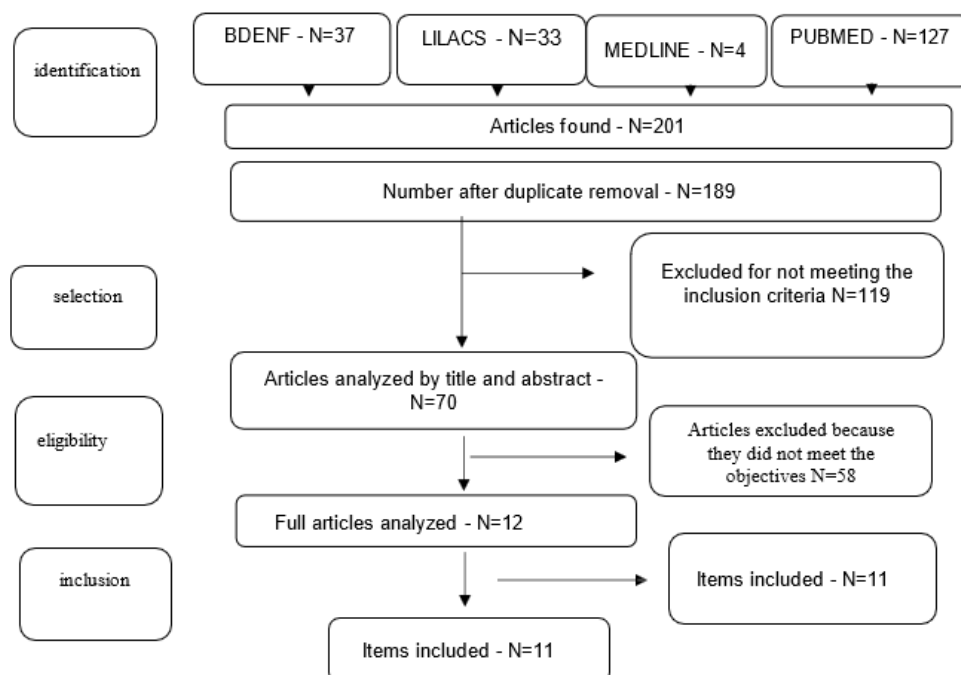
The inclusion criteria were: complete articles available in full in the databases, published between 2015 and 2025, in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. Theses, literature reviews, articles that did not fit the theme or objective, opinion articles, editorials, ministerial documents, and book chapters were excluded.

201 articles were found. Twelve were removed for duplicity; 116 did not meet the inclusion criteria. Of the 120 pre-selected and analyzed studies, 57 were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria, resulting in 11 studies included in the final analysis.

For the selection of publications, the recommendations of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), represented in Figure 1, were used.

Figure 1

Flow of the process of selecting studies for review



Source- Barbosa, 2024.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this integrative review, eleven articles that met the previously established inclusion criteria were analyzed, and then an overview of the articles evaluated will be presented. The data were carefully interpreted to analyze the results found, whether similar or different, based on the existing literature.

Table 1

Presentation of the synthesis of the included articles

Title	Author /Year	Goal	Method	Findings
Giving men a voice: repercussions of living with urinary incontinence and sexual practice	ALMEIDA <i>et al.</i> , 2023	Understanding the impact of urinary incontinence on men's sexual practice	This qualitative research was conducted in Rio de Janeiro with 18 elderly participants.	Urinary incontinence causes social isolation, embarrassment, shame, low self-esteem and sexual dissatisfaction.
Effects of experiences in sexuality on anxiety and quality of life of elderly people	SOUSA JR <i>et al.</i> , 2022	To analyze the effects of sexuality on anxiety and quality of life in the elderly	Cross-sectional and analytical study, with 550 participants throughout Brazil	Affective relationships and better coping with physical and social adversities reduced anxiety. The sexual act and coping with physical and social adversities increased the quality of life.
Ineffective sexuality pattern of elderly people with <i>diabetes mellitus</i>	SEVERINA <i>et al.</i> , 2022	To investigate the nursing diagnosis "Ineffective sexuality pattern"	This was a cross-sectional study with 134 elderly diabetics in the Federal District.	This diagnosis is crucial in the evaluation of elderly people with diabetes, given the influence of sexuality on behavior and personal satisfaction.
Exposure and vulnerability of the elderly to HIV/AIDS in sexual practice	ALBUQUERQUE <i>et al.</i> , 2020	to analyze the vulnerability of the elderly to HIV/AIDS in sexual practice	This is a quantitative descriptive study with 289 elderly people in Floriano, Piauí.	The lack of adequate information makes the elderly vulnerable, requiring the union of health professionals and public managers to strengthen public policies
Elderly people's perception of their sexuality	FEITOSA <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Analyze the perception of older adults about their sexuality	Qualitative and descriptive field research with nine elderly people in Ipumirim, Ceará	Older people recognize the importance of sexuality, are aware of their desires, and are aware of the benefits of an active sex life.

Aging, sexuality and nursing care: the view of the elderly woman	SOUZA <i>et al.</i> , 2019	To analyze the perception of 50 elderly women in Guanambi, Bahia (2016) about sexuality and nursing care	Qualitative - descriptive study	Elderly women hesitate to discuss sexuality, especially with health professionals, due to social influences that neglect the topic in women's health care
Attitudes of the elderly regarding the expression of their sexuality	SILVA <i>et al.</i> , 2019	Identify your attitudes toward sexuality	This is a descriptive and qualitative study with 19 elderly women in Rio Grande, RS	Elderly women showed favorable attitudes and did not notice major changes in the expression of sexuality after 60 years. Affective, loving, and sexual relationships are crucial for physical and mental well-being.
Sexuality of Elderly: knowledge/attit	EVANGELIST <i>et al.</i> , 2019	Evaluate the knowledge and attitude of 56	Study transversal, exploratory-	Despite adequate knowledge, nurses still
Family Health Strategy nurses' unit		nurses of the Family Health Strategy in Sobral, CE.	Descriptive and quantitative	demonstrate conservative attitudes.
Nursing team performance in relation to the sexuality of institutionalized elderly women	VENTURINI <i>et al.</i> , 2018	To analyze the team's performance in relation to the sexuality of elderly women.	This is a qualitative study with 18 nursing professionals in a Long-Term Care Institution in southern Brazil.	Personal beliefs, embarrassment and discomfort make it difficult to approach the topic. It emphasizes the need to strengthen academic training.
Sexuality of the elderly: knowledge/activit y of nurses in the Family Health Strategy	EVANGELIST <i>et al.</i> , 2019	To evaluate the knowledge and attitude of these professionals about sexuality in old age	This is a qualitative exploratory study with six physicians and six nurses of the Family Health Strategy in Crato-CE	The topic is difficult to address in consultations; There is a lack of actions focused on sexuality in health units, indicating a fragility in comprehensive care for the elderly.

Effect of Oxytocin Vaginal Gel on Vaginal Atrophy in Postmenopausal Women: A Randomized Clinical Trial	ZOHRABI <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Evaluated the impact of oxytocin vaginal gel on vaginal atrophy	Randomized controlled clinical trial with 96 postmenopausal women,	The eight-week intervention with oxytocin vaginal gel (400 IU) improves the vaginal maturation index and subjective symptoms of atrophy, in addition to reducing vaginal pH. The use of this medication is recommended for women with contraindications to hormone therapy.
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Of the articles analyzed, ten portrayed Brazilian research and one Iranian. Eight focused directly on the elderly population, while the remaining three addressed the care of health professionals for the elderly in the context of sexuality.

The predominance of Brazilian studies on sexuality in the elderly may be a reflection of public policies for the inclusion of the elderly in the country. Initiatives such as the National Policy for the Elderly, the Statute of the Elderly, the Primary Care Notebook (Aging and Health of the Elderly), the Elderly Person's Handbook and the Concept of Active Aging, among others, are legal frameworks that direct health and social actions, guaranteeing the rights of the elderly and imposing on the State the protection of this population. However, it is essential that the implementation of these policies also infer from a conscious, ethical and civic attitude on the part of all those who wish to age in a healthy way (WHO, 2005).

Three studies analyzed addressed sexuality in older adults with chronic conditions such as urinary incontinence, anxiety and diabetes, which could, in theory, limit sexual activity. However, the presence of these conditions does not always prevent sexual practice; on the contrary, an active sex life can even contribute to quality of life.

Although certain diseases can lead to psychosocial and physical limitations, impacting love relationships and sexual practice, it is crucial to recognize that sexual vitality is an important premise for health and well-being. Aging does not mean becoming asexual. It is essential to understand the patient, welcome their psychological suffering, and offer comprehensive care that respects all dimensions of their life (BUENO *et al.*, 2023).

The analysis of the studies revealed the dilemmas faced by elderly couples, who, despite the challenges, demonstrate the ability to adapt through companionship, acceptance and, sometimes, new arrangements in their relationships. In this context, dialogue emerges as a fundamental pillar for maintaining sexual health.

Two studies focused on prevention and knowledge. One of them, "Exposure and vulnerability of the elderly to HIV/AIDS in sexual practice", showed that the elderly are vulnerable to Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) due to lack of information. This reinforces the need to include the elderly population in sex education approaches. The other study, "Effect of oxytocin vaginal gel on vaginal atrophy in postmenopausal women: a randomized clinical trial", pointed to a solution to vaginal dryness, common in sexually active elderly women, relieving discomfort. Sex education is, therefore, a critical point.

A study warns of barriers that prevent the knowledge and care of the elderly in relation to STIs. These barriers include the absence of dialogue about sexuality in the family and school environment, restricted personal experiences, and the difficulty in discussing condom use, among other essential information (GOMES et al., 2024).

In addition, the research highlighted the effectiveness of products to improve vaginal hydration. One study showed that the use of non-hormonal intravaginal moisturizers, such as polycarbophile-based moisturizers, provided well-being and greater comfort and pleasure in sexual intercourse. This underlines the importance of practical solutions to improve the sexual experience in old age (VALE et al., 2019).

Two studies, one focused on women and the other on men, revealed that sexual desire and satisfaction do not decrease significantly with aging, despite the inevitable physiological changes. Both highlighted the importance of the affective relationship as a crucial component for sexual satisfaction. However, these studies also evidenced the strong social prejudice in relation to sexuality in the elderly, which often makes the elderly invisible and asexual. This phenomenon is a direct reflection of ageism, or ageism.

Ageism manifests itself through stereotypes, prejudices, and segregation against people based on age, similar to sexism and racism. Prejudiced conceptions and behaviors are internalized throughout life, through (often negative) social views and stereotypes about old age, which, in turn, shape feelings, thoughts, and attitudes towards older people (VON HUMBOLDT et al., 2024).

Five of the studies analyzed focused on the actions and conducts of health professionals – with emphasis on nurses – in relation to the sexuality of the elderly. A frequently identified nursing diagnosis was that of "Ineffective sexuality pattern".

In the professionals' reports, the difficulty in approaching sexuality for a comprehensive assessment was notorious. Terms such as "embarrassment", "influence from society", "discomfort", "personal beliefs" and "difficulty in addressing the topic during the consultation"

were recurrent. This evidences a fragility in the care offered by health professionals, configuring a gap in care.

Faced with these challenges, questions arise: Where is the failure? How can it be changed? What to do? The most forceful answer pointed out in the surveys is that education and knowledge are the basis for transformation. The need to address sexuality must begin in the family environment, progress in school and be consolidated in academic training.

A recent study (VENDRAMINI et al., 2024) confirms the difficulty of health professionals, including nurses, in discussing sexuality with the elderly population. Many still mistakenly believe that there is no active sex life in old age. It is crucial, therefore, to integrate this theme into the education of undergraduate students. Deepening knowledge about sexuality in old age can break down prejudices and stigmas, enabling comprehensive and more humanized care.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study sought to identify how the elderly experience their sexuality, aiming above all at applicability in teaching to improve care and facilitate dialogue on the subject. It is concluded that sexual activity persists in the lives of the elderly, even in the face of significant comorbidities. It is essential that health professionals recognize this reality, avoiding neglecting or making sexuality invisible in old age.

There is a fragility in the care provided by health professionals in relation to the sexuality of the elderly, with recurrent narratives of "embarrassment". This discomfort is paradoxical, since sexuality is an inherent aspect of human life in all its phases; Aging does not cancel it out.

This finding leads us to reflect on the pressing need to discuss and study the sexuality of the elderly further. It is questioned at what point in professional training is this theme actually addressed (anatomy, physiology, women's health, adult and elderly health?). Sexuality is still immersed in prejudices. It is believed that breaking these paradigms is only possible as knowledge on the subject is deepened.

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