

# ANALYSIS OF THE SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION OF THE SEXUALITY OF OLDER ADULTS: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

## ANÁLISE DA PRODUÇÃO CIENTÍFICA DA SEXUALIDADE DO IDOSO: UMA REVISÃO INTEGRATIVA

## ANÁLISIS DE LA PRODUCCIÓN CIENTÍFICA DE LA SEXUALIDAD DEL ADULTO MAYOR: UNA REVISIÓN INTEGRATIVA

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**Objective:** To analyze the scientific production on the sexuality of older people in the last five years, as well as its level of evidence. **Method:** An integrative review on the sexuality of the older people was conducted; Latin American and Caribbean Center for Health Sciences Information, Dialnet, EBSCO, National Library of Medicine, Redalyc, Science Direct, Online Scientific Electronic Library, Scopus and Springer databases were consulted looking for original articles published between 2015 and 2019. **Results:** Twenty-nine original articles were selected, of which 17 corresponded to qualitative design, 11 to quantitative design and one to mixed design. The level of evidence was evaluated and a descriptive analysis was performed. **Conclusion:** A considerable number of older people report being sexually active, expressing the need for approaches related to sexuality by health professionals, especially nurses. There is a positive relationship between satisfaction with sexuality and satisfaction with life among the elderly, reflecting the importance of studying this topic.

**Descriptors:** Sexuality. Elderly. Health of the Elderly. Nursing. Geriatric Nursing.

*Objetivo:* Analizar la producción científica sobre la sexualidad del adulto mayor en los últimos cinco años, así como su nivel de evidencia. *Método:* Se realizó una revisión integrativa sobre la sexualidad del adulto mayor, se consultaron las bases de datos Centro Latinoamericano y del Caribe de Información en Ciencias de la Salud, Dialnet, EBSCO, Biblioteca Nacional de Medicina, Redalyc, Science Direct, Biblioteca Electrónica Científica Online, Scopus y Springer buscando artículos originales publicados entre 2015 y 2019. *Resultados:* Se seleccionaron 29 artículos originales de los cuales 17 corresponden al diseño cualitativo, 11 al cuantitativo y uno de diseño mixto. Se evaluó el nivel de evidencia y se realizó un análisis descriptivo. *Conclusión:* Una cantidad considerable de adultos mayores refiere mantenerse sexualmente activo expresando la necesidad de abordajes relativos a la sexualidad por parte de los profesionales de salud, especialmente enfermería. Existe una relación positiva entre satisfacción con la sexualidad y satisfacción con la vida entre los adultos mayores, reflejando la importancia del estudio de este tema.

*Descriptorios:* Sexualidad. Adulto Mayor. Salud del Anciano. Enfermería. Enfermería Geriátrica.

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## Introduction

Population ageing is a growing reality, which refers to the change in the distribution of the population toward older ages. It is estimated that by the year 2050, more than 20% of the world's population will be 60 years or older<sup>(1)</sup>. In Mexico this phenomenon is present in almost 14 million older adults, with a tendency to increase to more than 33 million in the next three decades<sup>(2)</sup>. Similar to other countries, sexual issues are marginalized in Mexican health policies related to the care of the older adult<sup>(3)</sup>.

Currently, there is no social or health stimulus that encourages the older adult to address sexual issues, which favors existing negative stereotypes<sup>(4)</sup>, thus the importance of including their sexuality in gerontological programs and nursing interventions as a fundamental aspect of life<sup>(5)</sup> that requires care by the nurse throughout the ageing process.

The nursing discipline needs to broaden its vision and take up subjective aspects of old age that were not commonly part of their professional training<sup>(6)</sup>, one of these aspects is sexuality and its importance in the quality of life. It has been documented that professional nurses and nursing students recognize the need to address sexuality in the care of older adults<sup>(6-7)</sup> suggesting the beginning of the visibility of sexuality in old age.

Recognizing the importance of healthy aging and its relationship with approaches to sexuality as an indicator of quality of life<sup>(1)</sup>, it was considered necessary to gather scientific evidence on the subject to identify the latest knowledge generated to be implemented in nursing practice in order to improve the quality of life of older adults<sup>(8)</sup>.

There are stereotypes towards old age in relation to sexuality, which leads to a distancing of interest in the subject, so it is imperative for the nursing discipline to resume its study, in addition to this, little research and dissemination of the subject has been found. This could lead to a lack of knowledge and disinterest in nursing care for the sexuality of the elderly<sup>(9)</sup>, which limits the strengthening of the discipline from the educational to the health care field. Therefore, it

is considered of special relevance that nursing takes up the subject from a general perspective and awakens the disciplinary concern about the contribution of care to sexuality as an essential part of holistic care.

It is necessary then to contribute the integration of the literature in relation to sexuality among older people, which will enable to generate a critical analysis of existing knowledge and integrate it for the discipline, highlighting the importance of sexuality as a fundamental element in people's lives and the need for its assessment by the nurse to establish appropriate health strategies, therefore the question that guided the study was: What is the scientific production on the sexuality of older adults in the last five years? The main objective was to analyze the scientific production on the sexuality of older adults in the last five years and, secondly, to describe the level of scientific evidence of the articles published on the sexuality of older adults in the last five years.

## Method

### *Type of study*

This is an integrative review whose methodology enables the synthesis and analysis of the scientific knowledge of the chosen topic, in order to establish general conclusions on the subject. The steps to be followed were: 1) identification of the topic and selection of the research question; 2) establishment of the inclusion and exclusion criteria; 3) identification of the pre-selected and selected studies; 4) categorization of the selected studies; 5) analysis and interpretation of the results; and 6) presentation of the review/synthesis of knowledge<sup>(10)</sup>.

### *Selection Criteria*

The selection criteria were established as original articles in Spanish, English and Portuguese published from 2015 to 2019, a period chosen

according to the recommendations of scientific validity<sup>(11)</sup>, the articles had to include exclusively people aged 60 years or older; studies exploring the sexuality of older adults from the perspective of the spouse (under 60 years), professionals and students in the health area were excluded.

### Data Collection

A comprehensive literature search on sexuality in older people was conducted during the period from September to December 2019, with the following steps: 1) identify the descriptors “sexualidad”, “adulto mayor”, “sexuality”, “aged”,

“elderly”, “older adults”, “old man” “sexualidade” e “idoso” at the Medline thesaurus (MeSH) and Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS); 2) to carry out the research in the databases: Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (LILACS), Dialnet, EBSCO, National Library of Medicine (PubMed), Redalyc, Science Direct, Online Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Scopus y Springer, creating various combinations between the descriptors and with the Boolean operators “AND” and “OR”; 3) critical evaluation for the pre-selection of items (Chart 1).

**Chart 1** - Search strategies applied on databases. Guanajuato, Mexico - 2019

Databases	Strategy
LILACS	“sexualidade” AND “idoso”
Dialnet	“sexualidad” AND “adulto mayor”
EBSCO	“sexuality” AND “older adults” OR “older man” OR “aged” OR “elderly”
PubMed	“sexuality” AND “older adults” OR “older man” OR “aged” OR “elderly”
Redalyc	“sexualidad” AND adulto mayor
Science Direct	“sexuality” AND “older adults” OR “older man” OR “aged” OR “elderly”
Scopus	“sexuality” AND “older adults” OR “older man” OR “aged” OR “elderly”

Source: Created by the authors.

According to the nature of the databases, various search strategies were used in order to access as many articles as possible that met the established selection criteria (Chart 1). An *ex profesa* data matrix was created in the Excel® computer program for the storage and organization of the information. The authors functioned as evaluators in the article selection process in order to identify only those studies that met the inclusion criteria. As there were no discrepancies during the selection process, a third evaluator was not required, to reduce the risk of bias, the data matrix and search strategies were reviewed by an external evaluator once the collection was completed.

### Data analysis and processing

After reading the documents in their entirety, a descriptive analysis was performed to synthesize the information. The data were evaluated,

extracted and analyzed descriptively in the matrix composed of the following elements: title, year of publication, country where the study was conducted, sample size, objective, most outstanding results and level of evidence of the article according to its design, to conclude with the categorization of the data.

At this point it is worth mentioning that the level of evidence refers to the analysis of the validity of the results according to their methodological quality, guarantees the approach to scientific veracity and assesses that this truth can be translated into recommendations for practice. There are several tools for assessing the level of evidence of an article according to the approach, design and environment in which they were conducted<sup>(12)</sup>. In this review, the proposal of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE)<sup>(13)</sup> for quantitative studies and the level of evidence of Gálvez<sup>(14)</sup> for studies with a qualitative design were used.

### Ethical Aspects

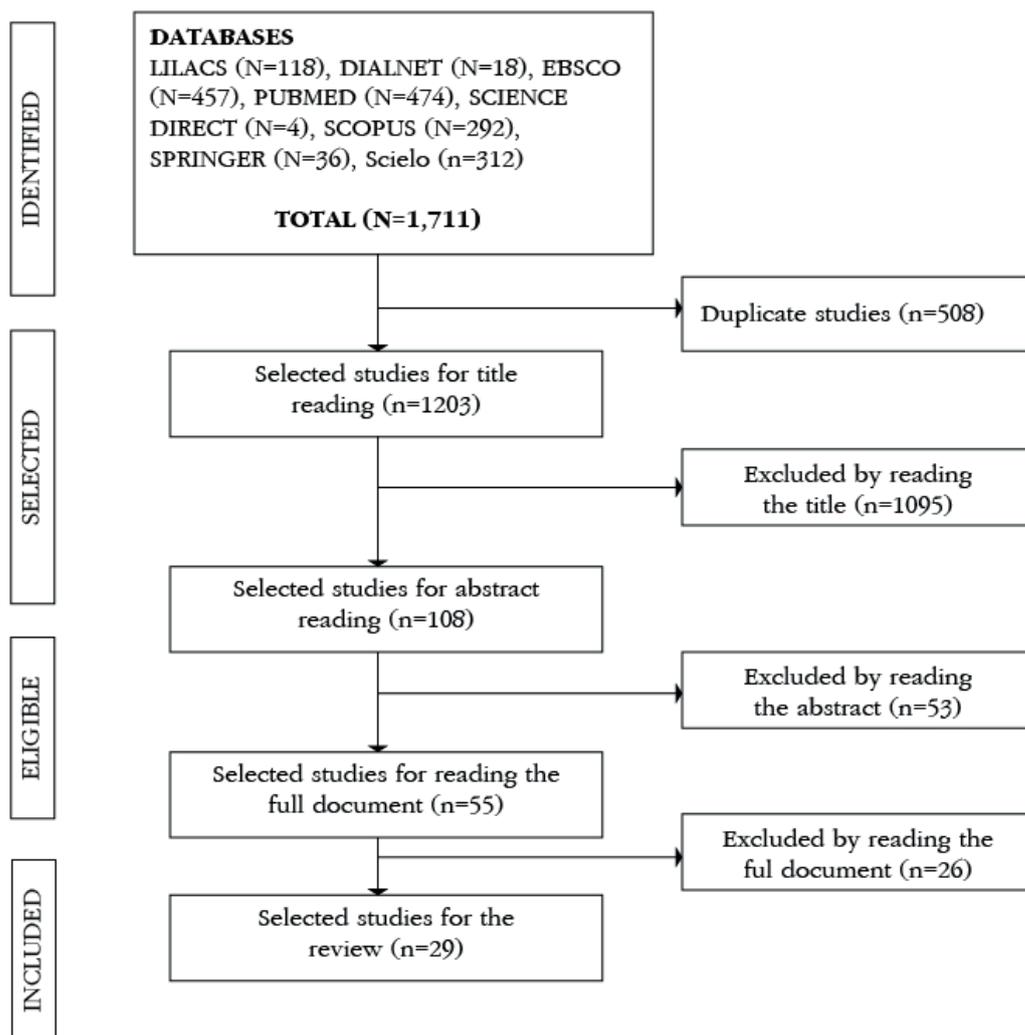
Not applicable due to the nature of the study.

### Results

At the end of the search in various databases, 1,711 studies were found. Duplicate studies

were then eliminated; after reading the title and, subsequently, the abstract, 55 articles that were potentially relevant for this review remained. Finally, after reading the entire document, 29 articles that met the selection criteria were selected (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** - Diagram of the selection process. Guanajuato, Mexico - 2019



Source: Created by the authors.

Of the total articles selected, it was found one third that were conducted in Brazil and 2 multicenter studies conducted in European countries. Thirty-four percent of the studies were published in 2018. Of the total selected articles, 17 correspond to qualitative design, 11 to quantitative design and one of them reports mixed design. The predominant level of evidence was good for

articles with quantitative design (B) and moderate in qualitative articles (III) (Chart 2).

All the studies reported the type of sampling used, presenting purposive and saturation sampling in the qualitative studies and convenience, simple random and systematic sampling in the quantitative studies. Of the articles, 55% were published in English, while

only 24% were published in Spanish. Six articles had a female-only population and one of them focused on male sexuality exclusively. Chart

2 shows the summary of the selected studies, which follows the descriptive analysis of the articles and the synthesis of the overall results.

**Chart 2** - Summary of the articles selected for the integrative review. Guanajuato, Mexico - 2019 (continued)

No	Author/ Country/ Year	Sample	Objective	Results
1	Allen MS, Desille AE <sup>(15)</sup> England 2017	5,745 OA*	To explore cross-time associations between personality and multiple components of sexual functioning and behavior of older adults.	Higher levels of openness and lower levels of acceptance are related to more liberal attitudes toward sex, greater number of sexual partners, greater sexual desire, more frequent sexual activity, lower levels of sexual dysfunction, and (women) a greater tendency toward homosexuality. Higher levels of conscientiousness were related to more conservative attitudes toward sex, lower levels of sexual dysfunction, and greater tendency toward heterosexuality. Higher levels of extroversion and lower levels of conscientiousness were related to a greater number of sexual partners (men).
2	Gois AB, Santos RFL, Silva TPS, Aguiar VFF <sup>(16)</sup> Brazil 2017	10 OA*	To know the perception of elderly men about their sexuality.	Lack of knowledge about sexuality were observed. The biological, physiological changes, pathologies and prejudice of the family were identified as obstacles. Sex is no longer important.
3	Bermejo AM, Rocano BLB, Mosquera VLE, Encalada TLE, Ortiz R, Narvaez PVF, et al <sup>(17)</sup> Ecuador 2017	306 OA*	Identify and analyze the scientific production on the sexuality of the spouse caring for the elderly in the process of dementia.	55.9% are "satisfied" with their sexuality; 39% do not consider that illnesses affect sexuality while 42% consider that medical treatments do not affect sexual activity. 48% think that fear affects sexuality and 79% believe that lack of communication with a partner also affects sexuality.
4	Silva FG, Pelzer MT, Neutzling BRS <sup>(18)</sup> Brazil 2019	19 women (OA* groups)	To identify the attitudes elderly women have with respect to their sexuality.	There are favorable attitudes towards sexuality and no significant changes are noted in the expression of sexuality after the age of 60. However, some feel embarrassed to talk about it due to a repressive upbringing. Friends are supportive in clarifying concerns about sexuality.
5	Afonso HD, Fajardo NML, Álvarez OA <sup>(19)</sup> Cuba 2015	90 OA*	To value the sexual behavior of a group of elderly people who attended an urology consultation.	52% are sexually active, 68% do not have privacy for sexual relations. 73% think that sexual relations are pleasurable and 92% believe it is necessary to receive information about sexuality.

**Chart 2** - Summary of the articles selected for the integrative review. Guanajuato, Mexico - 2019

(continued)

No	Author/ Country/ Year	Sample	Objective	Results
6	Ekundayo OO, Oyinlola FF, Sunmola AK <sup>(20)</sup> Nigeria 2015	375 OA*	To examine the influence of self-concept and intimacy on sexual behavior in middle and older adults.	There is a correlation between self-concept and sexual behavior of older adults, and intimacy and sexual behavior show a significant correlation.
7	Fileborn B, Hinchliff S, Lyons A, Heywood W, Minichiello V, Brown G, et al. <sup>(8)</sup> Australia 2017	27 OA*	Examining older men's experiences and understanding of sex in adult life.	There is a complex and contradictory understanding of sex, most consider it as broad and context-dependent, for some it is based on stereotypes of penetrative relationships. Sexual pleasure is related to bonding, intimacy and closeness, for others, bodily and embodied pleasures were central. Sex is important for most, for some the importance decreased from what it was in youth.
8	Fileborn B, Lyons A, Hinchliff S, Brown G, Heywood W, Minichiello V <sup>(21)</sup> Australia 2017	53 OA* (30 men and 23 women)	Examining the preferred sources of sex education of older Australian adults in later life.	Sources of information are the internet, the media, health care providers, books, and workshops or discussion groups. Those who actively sought information could shape their sexual practices with this effort.
9	Ghidara E, Antacle A, Erbetta F, Ferro M, Fitzsimons M, Loandos M <sup>(22)</sup> Argentina 2019	13 OA*	To evaluate the field of sexuality in the older adult.	The desire to naturalize the subject in the social circle and in the medical consultation is expressed. Older adults accept the ageing process, have a positive self-perception of their image and despite the obstacles, they adapt to it by seeking to feel good and enjoy a full sexuality.
10	Grigorovich A <sup>(23)</sup> Canada 2015	16 lesbian or bisexual older women	To investigate the impact of neoliberal home care reforms and existing care policies on this population's experiences of accessing care.	They report experiencing ongoing isolation and anxiety, as well as subtle discrimination. There is evidence of participants' resistance to heteronormativity and stress of sexual minorities.
11	Hernández Carrasco M, de la Fuente Ballesteros SL, García Granja N, Hidalgo Benito A, García Álvarez I, Cano Pazos M <sup>(24)</sup> Spain 2018	138 OA* (urban area)	To analyze the knowledge and characteristics of sexual function in people over 60 years old.	For 64%, sexual activity is important and 52% reported being sexually active. More than 70% of older adults report maintaining sexual attractiveness. Vaginal penetration is the most common practice (36%), followed by masturbation (9%) and oral sex (4%). Of the 34% who did not engage in sexual intercourse, it was due to not having a partner, not having desire, physical difficulties, and age. Five percent claimed to have protected sex, while 52% did not have safe sex. Fifty-nine percent had never discussed the issue with a health professional.

**Chart 2** - Summary of the articles selected for the integrative review. Guanajuato, Mexico - 2019 (continued)

No	Author/ Country/ Year	Sample	Objective	Results
12	Lima CFM, Caldas CP, Santos ID, Trotte LA, Silva BMC <sup>(25)</sup> Brazil 2017	12 OA* spouses	To understand the transitions experienced, their conditions and expected response patterns in the changing sexuality of spouse caregivers of older people with dementia.	Physical and cognitive changes are perceived as detrimental to the relationship, although affection persists. The importance of the coital relationship is reflected. The need for a professional approach to marital sexuality was identified. In family relationships, sexuality, dialogue and sex education were considered absent.
13	Lima RDO, Leite Junior FF <sup>(26)</sup> Brazil 2018	5 men OA*	To understand representations of the ageing body for older men, such as sexuality and the challenges of maintaining masculinity in contemporary times.	Ageing is felt by bodily changes. They believe that the man who reaches old age with his partner will not have so many difficulties, because there is an understanding of the limitations offered by time.
14	Melvin O, Togunde D <sup>(27)</sup> Nigeria 2018	252 OA*	To explore the views of Yoruba men and women over 60 years old on the use of condoms and their suitability against sexual infections.	There is limited awareness and experience with condoms. 23% felt that condom use can prevent sexually transmitted infections. Condom use as prevention varies by gender and marital status, both of which influence whether condom use might reduce sexual pleasures.
15	Meyrignac L, Bouati N, Sagne A, Gavazzi G, Zipper AC <sup>(28)</sup> France 2017	15 OA* residents (nursing home)	To explore the representations of their own sexuality and body ageing by older adults.	Some maintain a pre-sexual liberation view of their sexuality, assuming sexuality as a taboo linked to procreation, which is not part of the ageing body, and is perceived as degraded. Others have managed to free themselves from these social standards by claiming that pleasure is present in their ageing body.
16	Molina CC <sup>(29)</sup> Chile 2015	24 OA* (13 women y 11 men)	To analyze the meanings that older adults have towards their sexuality.	The meanings of sexuality are related to the ideas of older adults regarding the concept of sexuality. Three meanings of the concept emerge: the physical-bodily, the physical-affective and the affective-spiritual. Men are bolder in approaching the sexual theme and women approach it from a more affectionate ground.
17	Oliveira EL, Neves ALM, Silva IR, Oliveira EL, Neves ALM, Silva IR <sup>(30)</sup> Brazil 2018	5 women OA*	Understanding the meanings of sexuality for older women.	The constructed meanings of sexuality highlight two groups: women who no longer have the desire to have sex and those who still experience the desire to have sex because they have altered relations of subordination and oppression.

**Chart 2** - Summary of the articles selected for the integrative review. Guanajuato, Mexico - 2019

(continued)

No	Author/ Country/ Year	Sample	Objective	Results
18	Queiroz MAC, Lourenço RME, Coelho MMF, Miranda KCL, Barbosa RGB, Bezerra STF <sup>(31)</sup> Brazil 2015	30 OA* (23 women and 7 men)	To know the social representation about the sexuality of older people.	The central core of older people's representation of sexuality contains the words: love, affection and respect. Love was the most frequently expressed as important for sexuality. Respect was the second most pronounced and Affection in third place; these are considered necessary for the strengthening of coexistence. For women, before sexual pleasure, there is love, affection and respect.
19	Pinilla AMR, Pulgar DYT, Olmedo NM <sup>(32)</sup> Chile 2018	6 older women (74- 76 years old)	To unveil the meanings attributed to older women's sexuality.	Sexuality is in a secondary place, and accounts for less positive and pleasurable experiences associated with a fragile couple bond and situations of violence. The experiences reflect traditional gender roles and an association of sexuality with reproduction and child rearing.
20	Rodrigues DMMR, Nogueira IS, Higarashi IH, Heidemann ITSB, Baldissera VDA <sup>(33)</sup> Brazil 2019	15 older women	To analyze perceptions about sexuality and their respective critical disclosures learned in cultural circles developed with older women.	The construction of knowledge made it possible to recognize the biopsychosocial perception of sexuality, to understand the social and psychological differences and the different forms of pleasure at any stage of life.
21	Sathyanarayana RT, Darshan M, Tandon A, Ismail S <sup>(34)</sup> India 2015	259 OA*	To assess patterns of sexual activity and the prevalence of sexual disorders among individuals over 60 years old.	Among sexually active men, erectile dysfunction was prevalent in 43.5%, premature ejaculation in 11%, hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD) in 1% and anorgasmia in 0.5%; while among women, arousal disorder was prevalent in 28%, HSDD in 16%, anorgasmia in 20% and dyspareunia in 8%.
22	Skalacka K, Gerymski R <sup>(35)</sup> Poland 2018	83 OA*	To examine the relationship between global life satisfaction and sexual satisfaction in adults over 60 years old.	69% were in an intimate relationship with another person. Sixty percent had intimate relations in the last month and 66% in the last 6 months. Subtle forms (kissing, caressing, cuddling) of sexual activity/ expression predominated over coital relationships. Overall life satisfaction was significantly related to sexual satisfaction, intimate contacts in the last 1 to 6 months, and level of intimate activity. Those who had a permanent partner scored higher on satisfaction, overall life satisfaction, having an intimate relationship, and intimate contacts in the past month and in the past 6 months.

**Chart 2** - Summary of the articles selected for the integrative review. Guanajuato, Mexico - 2019 (continued)

No	Author/ Country/ Year	Sample	Objective	Results
23	Smith L, Yang L, Veronese N, Soysal P, Stubbs B, Jackson SE <sup>(36)</sup> England 2018	6.879 OA*	To investigate associations between sexual activity, problems and concerns, and experienced well-being in a representative sample of older adults.	Those who reported any sexual activity in the past year had significantly greater enjoyment of life compared with those who were not sexually active. Among sexually active men, coital intercourse and frequent kissing or fondling were associated with greater enjoyment of life, whereas in women only kissing or fondling was associated with greater enjoyment of life. Satisfaction with sex life in general was associated with greater enjoyment of life in men but not in women.
24	Souza MP, Marcon SS, Bueno SMV, Carreira L, Baldissera VDA <sup>(37)</sup> Brazil 2015	10 widowed older women	To describe the experience of sexuality of women attending a Life Center for Senior Citizens, and to verify the perception on the opinion of their family members.	The experience of sexuality underwent changes with widowhood, ensuring submission to social norms and rules for female behavior. The family supported social life, but not new love relationships. They did not live their sexuality fully and freely. Family opinion is important for decision making.
25	Træen B, Carvalheira AA, Kvaem IL, Hald GM <sup>(38)</sup> Denmark, Belgium, Portugal, Norway 2018	3,816 OA*	To identify the relationship between the use of the Internet to find a partner, seek sexual information or advice, read or watch pornography or buy sexual products, and sociodemographic factors and sexual perceptions and activities.	Thirty-six percent of men and 15% of women reported using the Internet for sexual and amorous purposes; in men, it was more common to have used it to read or watch erotica or pornography, buy sexual products or look for information or advices. More Portuguese women had used social networks to find a sex partner.
26	Træen B, Carvalheira AA, Hald GM, Lange T, Kvaem IL <sup>(39)</sup> Denmark, Belgium, Portugal, Norway 2019	3,854 OA*	To explore attitudes toward sexuality and sexual behavior in older adults in Norway, Denmark, Belgium, and Portugal.	Belgian and Danish men's attitudes leaned toward sex not being particularly important. Men and women were committed to the sex for love attitude. Positive attitudes toward sex for well-being and toward ageing and sexual changes correlated with less change in sexual interest and enjoyment, and with greater frequency of sexual intercourse and masturbation.

**Chart 2** - Summary of the articles selected for the integrative review. Guanajuato, Mexico - 2019

(conclusion)

No	Author/ Country/ Year	Sample	Objective	Results
27	Varişoğlu YY, Oskay ÜY <sup>(40)</sup> Turkey 2018	15 married older women	To identify changes in the sex lives of women over 60 years old and to determine the effects of advancing age on sexuality.	Within the positive perceptions of sexuality, marital harmony, the feeling of fraternity and friendship were found. Meanwhile, within the negative perceptions, marital disharmony, lack of sexual desire due to the feeling of loss, dyspareunia and the effect of culture (myths and taboos) were found.
28	Westwood S <sup>(41)</sup> England 2018	60 homosexuals or bisexuals OA*	Exploring aging, gender and sexuality from an equality perspective.	Living spaces and care are perceived to be inherently heterosexual. They are concerned about risky visibility. It is not welcome the forced commitment to share, with people of the same gender, common residential spaces.
29	Kim HY, Choe HS, Lee DS, Yoo JM, Lee SJ <sup>(42)</sup> South Korea 2019	337 OA*	To study sexual behavior and sexually transmitted urethritis (STU) status among the older population in South Korea.	42% are sexually active; most had 1 or no sexual partners: low-risk (97.5%) and high-risk (94%). One percent in the low-risk group and 10% in the high-risk group responded that they almost always use condoms. Erectile dysfunction was reported in 77% of the low- risk group and 80% of the high-risk group. Urethritis, gonorrhea, syphilis and genital herpes were reported in both groups, with gonorrhea being the most frequent. They are willing to receive sexual health education and prefer to receive it from the doctor/nurse with 34% in the low risk group while the high risk group reports 56%.

Source: Created by the authors.

\*Older Adults.

From the descriptive analysis, similar data were grouped together to generate three

categories (Chart 3) for a better understanding of the sexuality of older adults:

**Chart 3** – Summary of the categories.

Categories	Synthesis of analysis by category of the included articles
Sexual relations in old age	2, 3, 5, 11, 14, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 29.
Knowledge and attitudes towards sexuality	1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 15, 16, 17, 20, 24, 25, 28, 29.
Differences between men and women	9, 13, 16, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25.

Source: created by the authors.

The categories are described as follows:

### *Sexual relations in old age*

Coital and non-coital sexual relations are important for older adults despite the adverse effects of physical changes, diseases and stereotypes to which they are subjected, although this importance is recognized, the subject is made invisible by society and blood relations.

### *Knowledge and attitudes towards sexuality*

Older adults present a deficit of knowledge on sexual issues and demand the desire to naturalize these approaches in society, health services and family members. Attitudes towards sexuality are generally positive among older people, although some studies report conservative attitudes in this regard.

### *Differences between men and women*

It is necessary to highlight the differences arising from gender, since, as a result of the social role, there are very specific situations experienced by men and women that are essential for understanding the phenomenon in its full extent.

## **Discussion**

Sexuality is important for older adults despite the fact that it is constantly made invisible by society and health services. Emphasizing the results obtained, it can be seen that between 27% and 69% of the surveyed older adults refer to being sexually active<sup>(19,24,34,42)</sup>, referring to sexual practices such as vaginal penetration, masturbation and oral sex<sup>(24,39)</sup> as well as subtle practices such as kissing, caressing and hugging<sup>(35,36)</sup>. Among older people who did not maintain intimate relationships, the main causes were found to be lack of a partner, lack of privacy, lack of desire, physical difficulties and the cultural effect<sup>(19,24,40)</sup>.

Anatomophysiological changes, chronic diseases and social prejudices<sup>(16)</sup> were reported as

the main obstacles to sexual expression in older adults, but despite these obstacles, participants reported feeling satisfied with their sexuality even with the burden of chronic diseases and medical treatments<sup>(17)</sup>.

One more condition that could represent an obstacle is sexual dysfunctions in old age. Erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD) and anorgasmia in men, and arousal disorder, HSDD, anorgasmia and dyspareunia in women have been reported<sup>(34)</sup>. On the other hand, the presence of sexually transmitted diseases is a reality in this group, with the presence of gonorrhea, syphilis, genital herpes and urethritis<sup>(42)</sup>, data that may be related to the low percentages of protected sexual practices and limited sexual awareness<sup>(24,27)</sup>.

Older adults show a deficit of knowledge about aspects related to sexuality in old age<sup>(16)</sup>, referring as sources of information on sexual issues, the use of internet, media, health personnel, books, workshops and discussion groups<sup>(21)</sup>. This lack of knowledge is worrisome because in addition to affecting sexual expression it can also affect the health of the older adults, which makes evident the need to receive guidance from health personnel, especially physicians and nurses<sup>(25,42)</sup> to promote the construction of knowledge through dialogue<sup>(33)</sup>.

The sexuality of older adults is finding a channel of expression through digital media, as it has been described how older adults have found in the Internet a means to read and watch pornography, buy sexual products, search for information and partners<sup>(38)</sup>. Added to this trend is the desire to naturalize sexual approaches in society and in the family, as older adults report feeling oppression and lack of support from family members when dealing with these issues<sup>(22,25,37)</sup>.

In general, older adults show positive attitude about sexuality; for many, coital or non-coital sexual relations still important and pleasurable, even with social standards and stereotypes<sup>(8,18,28,37)</sup>. Even so, there are those who do not consider it important in the last stage of life, expressing no desire for sexual intercourse<sup>(30)</sup> or assign very little importance to sexuality in their lives<sup>(8)</sup>,

which is related to conservative attitudes towards sexuality<sup>(15)</sup> and to the self-concept of the older adult<sup>(20)</sup>.

Institutionalized homosexual older adults report feeling that their needs are invisible to the staff, since all the spaces in the home are intended for heterosexual people, yet they fear that being visible could isolate them from the rest of the residents<sup>(41)</sup>. This feeling of isolation and anxiety was also reported in a study with bisexual and homosexual women, when they witnessed overt or subtle situations of heterosexism and discrimination<sup>(23)</sup>.

In relation to gender, it is worth highlighting men's belief that reaching old age with a partner reduces the difficulties related to sexuality, because there is an understanding of the ageing process<sup>(26)</sup>. In addition, they are more daring in approaching sexual topics, as opposed to women who approach them from an affective point of view<sup>(29)</sup>, because for women, love, respect and affection come before sexual pleasure<sup>(31)</sup>, hence the association between non-coital relationships and greater enjoyment of life<sup>(36)</sup>.

Among men, frequent coital and non-coital relations and sexual satisfaction are related to greater enjoyment of life<sup>(36,38)</sup>; in addition, men who presented greater extroversion and less conscientiousness reported having a greater number of sexual partners<sup>(15)</sup>. Continuing with the male gender, it was reported that the main dysfunction referred to is the erectile dysfunction, with a prevalence greater than 40%; while among women the dysfunction with the highest percentage was arousal disorder<sup>(34)</sup>, that could be related to the expression of the absence of sexual desire reported by Brazilian women<sup>(30)</sup>.

For many older women, sexuality is in second place due to not very positive experiences, a weak bond with a partner, violence in relationships and the traditional gender role that has been socially assigned<sup>(30,32)</sup>, even perceiving as improper the desire to have a partner after widowhood, referring to the null sensation of freedom and the fear of the judgment of blood relatives<sup>(37)</sup>. Despite these differences, in both genders the positive self-perception and the

adaptation to the new body conditions enable the full enjoyment of sexuality<sup>(22)</sup>.

The relevance of sexuality among older adults has been described in agreement with other reviews on the subject<sup>(43,44)</sup>, however, and despite the importance assigned by most, there are still situations that affect sexual expression in the elderly that should be addressed by health personnel<sup>(45)</sup>.

## Conclusions

Recent scientific evidence shows the interest of older adults in their sexuality, which is lived in secret due to the social and institutional invisibility of the subject, a sexuality that far from being seen as an essential part of the older person has become a potential source of physical and emotional problems, where issues such as sexual dysfunctions, lack of sex education and risky sexual practices are a reality, yet it is the older adults themselves who report the absence of attention to these topics by the health services.

Sexuality in old age is affected by the physical changes typical of ageing and the pathologies that accompany them; these affectations have been documented by health professionals but scarcely addressed in clinical care. The neglect of sexuality affects the health of the elderly, which is why it must be sought ways to intervene and enhance the benefits of free sexual expression in this stage of life.

Nursing, as a discipline in charge of caring for people, should be involved in the generation of answers and support for the free expression of sexual issues. Current scientific evidence enables the planning and development of strategies to address the sexuality of the elderly, but there is a need for studies that meet higher levels of evidence and guide clinical practice with greater certainty.

In the present study, consistent conceptual elements were found in relation to the topic, but no studies were found that propose or develop interventions to care for the sexuality of older adults and that enable recommendations to be made for clinical practice; however, this

limitation represents a window of opportunity for nursing to pay attention to the development of new proposals. More research by nurses is needed to provide recommendations for practice with a high level of evidence, to contribute to support educational methods that are currently used and to develop new strategies to care for older adults' sexuality.

### *Implications for practice*

The results of the review show the interest of diverse health sciences in older people sexuality, focusing on physical changes and sexual relations, but few studies address the needs that older adults may demand regarding this topic. This limits the promotion and prevention strategies that enable to intervene, educate and support older people to make visible their sexuality as an essential part of their personality.

Therefore, it is necessary to develop research proposals that deepen the experiences of older adults with respect to sexuality in order to understand sexuality in old age and identify the care needs that should be covered by nursing.

This article provides a basic guide to the current state of the art according to published studies and can be used as study material for nurses in training, those caring for the elderly and even by other health professionals.

### **Collaborations:**

1 – conception, design, analysis and interpretation of data: Cinthia Elizabeth González-Soto and Raúl Fernando Guerrero-Castañeda.

2 – article writing and relevant critical review of the intellectual content: Cinthia Elizabeth González-Soto and Raúl Fernando Guerrero-Castañeda.

3 – final approval of the version to be published: Cinthia Elizabeth González-Soto and Raúl Fernando Guerrero-Castañeda.

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