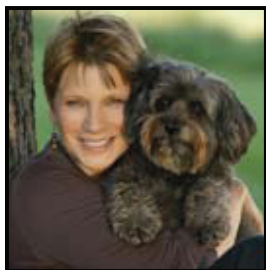




Health & Medicine



It Takes Two To Tango – The Vagina after Menopause



Dr. Kate Thomsen and Silky

I've heard the story many times now. "He thought he would surprise me. We both ended up being surprised and it didn't work out so well," and "We made a special date and we were really looking forward to a fun time – just like the old days – and then...." What are they referring to? It's mid life sex in the age of Viagra. For some couples, it's more complicated than they expected.

Of course there are many ways to share closeness and intimacy – physical and emotional. Sexual intercourse between a man and a woman is just one way. Many couples make this method of physical pleasuring the centerpiece of their sex life and enjoy finding time for it when the kids are out and the computer is down and the house is cleaned and the phone isn't ringing and they aren't exhausted from a long commute at the end of a 10 hour work day. And then – midlife happens. Bodies change and don't work quite as reliably. Some couples just get out of the routine because so much is going on in life. A little alcohol, diabetes, or blood pressure medications and –whoops! erectile dysfunction. Some antidepressant medications and whoops! you forget where you put your libido. And time passes... Then, he has a talk with his doctor or he goes shopping for 2 free-standing side-by-side bathtubs. He hears about the possibility of an erection

that can last for four hours and he knows what he is going to do – surprise you!!

And surprise it is – sometimes for both parties. In some cases he's ready and she can't let him in. In other cases, he is happily getting his sexual groove going and she is grimacing in pain. So what's happening? A woman's body changes in midlife with a drop in the hormone called estrogen. For many women, the vaginal changes are not that noticeable until she attempts intercourse. The vaginal opening may be tighter; it's dry inside and the vaginal walls burn with the friction of intercourse. Bummer.

Mother Nature gave estrogen many roles for women. At puberty, the estrogen blood level is rising, causing girls' bodies to take on their curves. Estrogen's effect on the vagina is to begin preparing it for sexual activity and procreation: the vaginal walls thicken, glands begin to produce secretions, a tough layer of cells protects the surface. The whole ecology changes. During a woman's reproductive years, her vaginal walls are 30 cell-layers thick. The cells are constantly growing up toward the surface layer, where they mature under the direct influence of estrogen. This top layer of mature cells is composed of tough, protective cells called squamous cells – the same kind that are found on your outer skin. These fully estrogenized cells secrete a sugar that feeds the lactobacillus bacteria. Lactobacillus are the primary species of bacteria that live in the vagina. They are preferred because they secrete acid – keeping the healthy vaginal pH acidic. So Mother Nature, whose prime interest is procreation, created a vaginal environment that is compatible with sexual

intercourse – 30 cell layers worth of a cushiony wall that is capable of expanding to accommodate large objects (like a baby or a penis), a tough layer of cells on the surface to withstand injury, glands that can produce lubricating fluids and an acid pH to fight unwanted bugs. Amazing! And with the decline in estrogen at midlife, everything reverses – the vaginal walls become thinner, tighter, drier, more vulnerable and the pH becomes alkaline. Obviously no one told Mother Nature about the sex life women were envisioning after the kids went off to college. But Mother Nature's reply would be, "Be thankful you're still alive. Many species die shortly after they procreate. If you want to continue to live and have sex then you have to use your imagination." (I'm paraphrasing).

What's a girl to do? First of all, communication is an essential part of a good sex life. Couples need to be able to discuss their feelings, fears, hopes and expectations – both emotional and physical. Next, you can "use your imagination." There are many ways that couples can share mutual physical pleasure and trying "new things" can be a spark for the libido. You can also fool Mother Nature and buy a tube of lube. Good choices for vaginal lubrication include AstroGlide and Slippery Stuff among others. They are available at your drug store. Fourth, find out if you are a candidate for estrogen. Almost everybody can use vaginal estrogen (Estring – a ring that slowly releases estrogen and lasts 3 months; estrogen suppositories like VagiFem; and Estrogen creams including some fine bio-identical choices.) You can't use vaginal estrogen cream as a lubricant for sex though as it exposes your partner. If you

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do that, you're likely to give your partner man-boobs. The purpose of the vaginal estrogen is hormone replacement for the vaginal walls. It will make your vagina feel young again – but only as long as you use it (usually 2 - 3 times per week). When you stop feeding it estrogen, the vagina becomes menopausal again. Fifth, if you also have serious hot flashes, night sweats, and insomnia, you may want to use a systemic estrogen (pills, patches, creams, troches...). In many cases, using systemic estrogen to treat these symptoms also has a good effect in the vagina. Some women will still find sex uncomfortable and will get relief by using a little vaginal estrogen as well.

One final thought. The "natural" menopausal vagina is lined with immature cells. These cells don't secrete the sugars that feed the beneficial vaginal bacteria, lacto-

bacillus. Without these sugars, the menopausal vagina is incapable of supporting lactobacillus. For the same reason, it is incapable of supporting the growth of yeast and menopausal women typically do not get yeast infections. Re-introducing estrogen can increase the risk of yeast vaginitis for some women. So, whether you are enjoying a yeast-free menopausal vagina, or a lubricated estrogenized vagina, there's plenty of room for new and creative ways to enjoy your lover.

Happy Imaginings...

Dr Kate Thomsen has a holistic health practice in Pennington, NJ. She is board certified in Family Medicine and in Integrative/Holistic Medicine. For more information see www.drkatethomsen.com or call the office at 609-818-9700.