

Sexually transmitted infections in older adults: a quali-quantitative study

Infecções sexualmente transmissíveis em idosos: um estudo quali-quantitativo

Infecciones de transmisión sexual en adultos mayores: un estudio cualitativo-cuantitativo

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RESUMO

Introdução: Com o aumento da expectativa de vida, a população idosa cresce, assim como a manutenção de uma vida sexual ativa nessa faixa etária. Esse cenário destaca a necessidade de prevenção de infecções sexualmente transmissíveis (ISTs), desafiando estereótipos e ampliando o acesso à informação e aos cuidados de saúde. Este estudo concentra-se na sexualidade de idosos e em seu conhecimento sobre métodos de prevenção de ISTs. **Objetivo:** Identificar o nível de conhecimento entre idosos sobre ISTs e estratégias de prevenção. **Métodos:** Foi realizado um estudo de campo quali-quantitativo utilizando amostragem por conveniência. Os dados foram coletados por meio de um questionário online disponível do início de maio ao início de junho de 2024. **Resultados:** A maioria dos idosos demonstrou conhecimento básico sobre ISTs. **Discussão:** Mitos e tabus persistentes em torno da sexualidade na terceira idade ignoram o fato de que os idosos mantêm interesses sexuais, reforçando o estigma e revelando lacunas na compreensão da multidimensionalidade da sexualidade humana. **Conclusão:** Os profissionais de saúde – especialmente os enfermeiros – devem adotar uma abordagem mais reflexiva e proativa, visto que a maioria dos idosos não recebe orientação profissional sobre o tema, aumentando sua vulnerabilidade às ISTs. **Descritores:** Infecções sexualmente transmissíveis; Saúde dos idosos; prevenção de ISTs.

ABSTRACT

Introduction: As life expectancy increases, the older adult population grows, along with the maintenance of active sexual lives in this age group. This scenario highlights the need for sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention, challenging stereotypes and expanding access to information and health care. This study focuses on the sexuality of older adults and their knowledge of STI prevention methods. **Objective:** To identify the level of knowledge among older adults regarding STIs and prevention strategies. **Methods:** A quali-quantitative field study was conducted using convenience sampling. Data were collected through an online questionnaire available from early May to early June 2024. **Results:** Most older adults demonstrated basic knowledge of STIs. **Discussion:** Persistent myths and taboos surrounding sexuality in older age ignore the fact that older adults maintain sexual interests, reinforcing stigma and revealing gaps in understanding the multidimensionality of human sexuality. **Conclusion:** Health professionals – especially nurses – must adopt a more reflective and proactive approach, as most older adults do not receive professional guidance on the topic, increasing their vulnerability to STIs. **Descriptors:** Sexually transmitted infections; Older adults' health; STI prevention.

RESUMEN

Introducción: Con el aumento de la esperanza de vida, crece la población de adultos mayores, junto con el mantenimiento de una vida sexual activa en este grupo de edad. Esta situación subraya la necesidad de prevenir las infecciones de transmisión sexual (ITS), desafiar los estereotipos y ampliar el acceso a la información y la atención médica. Este estudio se centra en la sexualidad de los adultos mayores y su conocimiento sobre los métodos de prevención de las ITS. **Objetivo:** Identificar el nivel de conocimiento entre los adultos mayores sobre las ITS y las estrategias de prevención. **Métodos:** Se realizó un estudio de campo cualitativo-cuantitativo mediante muestreo por conveniencia. Los datos se recopilaron a través de un cuestionario en línea disponible desde principios de mayo hasta principios de junio de 2024. **Resultados:** La mayoría de los adultos mayores demostraron conocimientos básicos sobre las ITS. **Discusión:** Los mitos y tabúes persistentes en torno a la sexualidad en la tercera edad ignoran el hecho de que los adultos mayores mantienen intereses sexuales, lo que refuerza el estigma y revela lagunas en la comprensión de la multidimensionalidad de la sexualidad humana. **Conclusión:** Los profesionales de la salud, especialmente el personal de enfermería, deben adoptar un enfoque más reflexivo y proactivo, ya que la mayoría de los adultos mayores no reciben orientación profesional sobre el tema, lo que aumenta su vulnerabilidad a las ITS. **Descritores:** Infecciones de transmisión sexual; Salud de los adultos mayores; Prevención de las ITS.

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ORIGINAL

Introduction

Brazil's demographic profile is undergoing significant transformation as the population ages, following trends observed in several developed countries. Advances in medicine and increased life expectancy have contributed to this shift. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), individuals aged ≥ 60 years represented 6.1% of the population in 1980, rising to 15.8% in 2022 – an increase of 46.6% compared to the 2010 Census (1). Meanwhile, the proportion of children aged ≤ 14 years decreased from 38.2% in 1980 to 19.8% in 2022, reflecting declining fertility rates.

Population aging occurs when younger age groups decrease proportionally. Declining birth rates and reduced mortality across all age groups, including older adults, have accelerated this demographic transition (1).

Life expectancy among older adults continues to rise, and projections indicate that this population will triple in the next two decades. Aging is a multifaceted process that extends beyond chronological age and encompasses various aspects of health, including sexuality, which plays a crucial role in quality of life (1).

The *World Report on Ageing and Health* (2015) highlights that many societal assumptions about older adults are rooted in stereotypes (2). Sexuality is particularly affected by these misconceptions, as it remains a silenced topic in older age due to sociocultural myths and taboos. Physiological changes, religious beliefs, family pressures, and individual factors reinforce stigma and hinder older adults from fully exercising their sexuality (3).

Societal perceptions contribute to misinformation and influence health professionals' practices. STI prevention campaigns typically target younger populations, leaving older adults underserved. This lack of targeted education contributes to rising STI rates among older adults (4,5).

Research shows that older adults remain sexually active, even beyond age 80 (2). However, the persistent belief that sexuality is exclusive to youth reinforces stigma among older adults, health professionals, and families, compromising safe sexual practices (6,7).

STIs among older adults are influenced by cultural, spiritual, and structural factors, including insufficient professional training and lack of health education tailored to this population (8). Although many nurses possess knowledge about sexuality in older age, they often maintain conservative attitudes and fail to provide sexual health education to older adults (9).

Sexuality is a natural physiological and emotional need that contributes to well-being in older age. Knowledge and awareness of behaviors that increase vulnerability to STIs are essential for promoting healthy sexual practices (4).

This study aims to assess the level of knowledge among older adults regarding STIs and prevention methods, evaluate access to health professionals for guidance, and encourage reflection on the topic.

Methods

This quali-quantitative cross-sectional field study used convenience sampling. Participants were adults aged ≥ 60 years of both sexes who agreed to participate by signing the electronic informed consent form. Data collection occurred from early

May to early June 2024. The final sample included 34 participants (16 women and 18 men).

Data were collected using an online questionnaire with 16 self-developed items, including dichotomous (yes/no) and open-ended questions. Items addressed sociodemographic characteristics, STI knowledge, and prevention practices.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics generated by Google Forms. The study followed the ethical guidelines of Resolution 466/2012 of the Brazilian National Health Council and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (Opinion No. 6.796.900).

Results

Most participants were aged 60–70 years (64.7%), with 52.9% male and 47.1% female. Married individuals represented 47.1% of the sample. Regarding education, 26.5% had completed high school, and 26.5% had completed up to the 4th grade of elementary school.

Regarding STI knowledge, 85.3% reported having heard of STIs, while 14.7% had not. Among those familiar with STIs, the most frequently mentioned were HIV (83.9%), gonorrhea/chlamydia (83.9%), syphilis (77.4%), hepatitis B and C, HPV, and genital herpes.

Most participants (91.2%) believed STIs could be prevented, and 87.1% identified condoms as a preventive method. However, 32.3% incorrectly believed that oral contraceptives also prevent STIs. Condom use was low: 58.8% reported not using condoms, 20.6% used them, and 20.6% used them occasionally.

Regarding access to health professionals, 58.8% reported not having a trusted professional to discuss sexuality or STIs. Additionally, 67.6% had never participated in educational activities on STIs.

Most participants (73.6%) believed that society judges sexuality in older age.

Discussion

Sexuality remains an integral part of life regardless of age (10). Active and healthy aging is associated with physical and mental well-being, and sexual expression contributes to quality of life (11,12).

Although most participants demonstrated basic STI knowledge, a significant portion had never heard of STIs, indicating persistent gaps in sexual health education for older adults.

National data show increasing STI prevalence among older adults. Between 2017 and 2021, 275,353 STI cases were reported among individuals aged 60–89 years, with notable increases in 2018 and 2021 (13). The most prevalent STIs in Brazil include syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, HIV, HPV, genital herpes, pelvic inflammatory disease, donovanosis, trichomoniasis, chancroid, and lymphogranuloma venereum (14).

Some participants used outdated terms such as “crista de galo” (HPV) and “chato” (pubic lice), reflecting limited and outdated knowledge. Many reported receiving sexual health education only in youth, highlighting the absence of age-appropriate educational initiatives.

Despite recognizing condoms as a preventive method, most participants did not use them. Misconceptions—such as believing oral contraceptives prevent STIs—further increase vulnerability. Older adults may avoid condoms due to embarrassment, lack of familiarity, or the belief that condoms are solely for pregnancy prevention (15,16).

The lack of educational activities and absence of trusted health professionals to discuss sexuality exacerbate risks. Physiological changes associated with aging increase susceptibility to infections, making sexual health education essential (17). Primary health care nurses play a crucial role in promoting sexual health, yet sexual health education remains disproportionately focused on younger populations (18). Health professionals must be trained to address sexuality in older age without prejudice, using inclusive and participatory educational strategies (19–21).

The belief that aging leads to asexuality contributes to the invisibility of older adults' sexual needs (22). Sexuality encompasses emotional intimacy, affection, and connection—not only intercourse (7).

Most participants perceived societal judgment regarding sexuality in older age, reinforcing stigma and limiting access to information and care.

Conclusion

The study achieved its objectives by identifying the level of STI knowledge among older adults and assessing their understanding of prevention methods.

Although most participants were aware of STIs, their knowledge was superficial, and misconceptions persisted—particularly regarding prevention. Low condom use and incorrect beliefs about contraceptives highlight vulnerability to STIs.

Health professionals must adopt proactive, inclusive, and nonjudgmental approaches to sexual health education for older adults. Recognizing older adults as sexually active individuals is essential for developing effective preventive interventions.

The lack of trusted health professionals and limited access to educational activities underscore the need for improved training and expanded sexual health initiatives within primary care.

This study calls attention to the responsibility of health professionals—especially nurses—to promote sexual health, challenge stereotypes, and support comprehensive care for older adults.

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