Sexual Health

Women and Sexual Health

For many years, doctors viewed the sexual health of women as primarily concerning their ability to engage in sexual activity and bear children. Gradually, however, a more comprehensive understanding of female sexual health emerged, one that now recognizes that women's sexual health encompasses the full scope of what women need to achieve overall health and happiness.

According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, discussions about sexual health should address the diverse issues women experience across their life span, from puberty through menopause. The group suggests that ob-gyns are uniquely positioned to generate conversations with women about issues that the World Health Organization cites as key to the achievement of good sexual health.

Chief among these issues are sexual function and women's right to have safe and pleasurable sexual experiences and relationships free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

When a woman understands how her body works, she's more likely to feel comfortable with her unique sexuality. Access to accurate and trustworthy information on reproductive health, contraceptives and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) as well as an understanding of the importance of sexual relationships in which women feel safe and empowered are all prerequisites for good sexual health.

In support of their sexual and mental health, women must learn how to identify unhealthy relationships and become secure enough—emotionally and financially—to leave abusive partners and cope with the aftermath of the dissolution of these unions.

Numerous physical factors can affect women's sexual health. For example, hormonal imbalances during menopause can cause pain during sex, vaginal dryness or reduce a woman's sexual desire. Additionally, STIs, such as chlamydia and gonorrhea, can lead to conditions such as pelvic inflammatory disease. Also, some common medications, such as antidepressants, can trigger sexual side effects.

Various health conditions, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, multiple sclerosis and kidney failure as well as more minor ones, like an individual's preoccupation with work, finances or other personal problems they are experiencing at home, can cause sexual dysfunction.

Psychological factors can also affect women's sexual health. These include the conflicting cultural messages women receive about sexuality, body image and gender roles as well as the effects of

the male-female power dynamic in society.

Addressing the sexual health of older women must also be a part of comprehensive efforts to improve women's overall physical and emotional health. Aging is a key phase in women's lives that affects their well-being across the board. Many older women may be unaware that remaining sexually active continues to put them at risk for HIV and STIs, such as genital herpes. (In 2018, 17% of newly diagnosed cases of HIV were among people ages 50 and older.)

Good sexual health is an integral component of an individual's overall physical and emotional well-being. For this reason, nurturing women's sexual health is a crucial goal for societies to pursue.

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