

Sexuality in the climacterium

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Summary

A retrospective study on 421 women who spontaneously attended the Menopausal Center of Physiopathology of Human Reproduction at Bari University has been carried out to evaluate the incidence of the decrease of libido in climacterium and factors that affect it.

The results show a high incidence of decreased libido (46%) and a correlation with age, dyspareunia and housewife status.

Key words: Libido; Climacterium.

Introduction

Old age is associated with loss of sexual interest, and it is believed that anatomical, physiological and psychological changes associated with climacterium influence sexuality in this age group.

A reduction in circulating estrogen levels has a lot of effects on sexual function, causing a decrease of female pelvic support, a loss of lubrication of the urogenital tissue and changes in body configuration, that involve skin, breasts, muscles, and bones alterations. For many women these changes lead to an alteration of their own image, a decrease of their own esteem, and a decrease of sexual desire. In western societies social expectations have a negative impact on sexuality, considering elderly women as sexually inactive [1].

The urogenital atrophy due to the loss of estrogens is one of the most important contributions to the decline of sexual activity in menopause, even if the sexual function is affected by an interaction of psychological, sociocultural and interpersonal factors [2,3].

On the other hand, the poor efficacy of HRT to determine the sexual behavior shows that hormones are not the only ones to affect it [4,5], since only exogenous and endogenous testosterone has a certain role in the treatment of sexual dysfunctions [6,7,8].

To investigate the incidence of decreased libido in climacterium and factors that affect it, we carried out a study on 421 women who unpromptedly attended the Menopausal Center of Physiopathology of Human Reproduction at Bari University.

Methods

We examined the incidence of variation of the libido on 421 women in climacterium, who spontaneously attended the Menopausal Center of Physiopathology of Human Reproduction at Bari University from October 1994 to February 1997.

All women were questioned by a gynecologist of the Center during the first examination about a decrease of libido.

The patients examined were divided into two groups; the first (group I) with related decreased libido, and the second (group II) without a decrease.

The following variables were taken into consideration: age, age at menopause, kind of menopause, climacteric status, civil status, profession, education, dyspareunia, absence of sexual intercourse.

For analysis of statistical data we used the chi-square test.

Results

The percentage of women with a related decrease of libido was 46%; the median age in this group was higher (51.1% vs 49.8% $p=0.03$) than the other group (Table 1).

We did not find any significant differences between the group with related decreased libido and the group without decrease, with regard to onset of menopause, or kind of menopause (Table 1).

No statistical correlations were found as far as civil status and education are concerned.

Instead, a decrease of libido was correlated with housewife status (61.3% vs 48.01% $p=0.007$) and with the presence of dyspareunia (0.7% vs 11.4% $p<0.001$) (Table 2).

Table 1. — Age, menopause, dyspareunia and sexual intercourse.

	Group I no. 194		Group II no. 227		p
Mean Age	51.1 years		49.8 years		0.03
Mean age at menopause	46.8		46.7		0.96
	N.	%	N.	%	
Menopause					
spontaneous	80	41.2	89	39.2	0.84
surgical	36	18.5	30	13.2	0.17
perimenopausal	78	40.2	108	47.5	0.15
Dyspareunia					
absence	105	54.1	182	80.1	
presence	79	40.7	26	11.4	<0.001
Absence of sexual intercourse	10	5.1	19	8.3	0.26

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Table 2. — *Civil status, education, profession.*

	Group I		Group II		p
	N.	%	N.	%	
Civil status					
married	185	95.3	206	90.7	0.10
unmarried	9	4.6	21	9.2	
Education					
none/up to age 14	121	62.2	142	62.5	0.95
diploma/university degree	73	37.5	85	37.4	
Profession					
housewife	119	61.3	109	48.1	0.007
professional	2	1.03	4	1.7	
employee	8	4.1	14	6.1	
office worker	26	13.4	39	14.9	
pensioner	12	6.1	17	7.4	
artisan	9	4.6	15	6.6	
other	18	9.2	29	12.7	

Discussion

Sexuality is rightly considered as an important indicator of quality of life in elderly women [9,10] and for this reason deserving of careful consideration.

The main factors that determine the variances in sexuality seem however to be relational and psychosocial factors rather than hormonal [11].

In a high percentage of women in our sample who reported decreased libido there was a correlation with social factors rather than menopause. Additionally, it was found that the problem of sexuality in menopause is important and has a complex pathogenesis which seems to be difficult to resolve.

Nonetheless, resolving some symptoms, such as dyspareunia which is probably connected to hormonal depriva-

tion, could already be a profitable approach, but we also have to consider the influence of socio-professional factors.

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