

# Sex toy use among a demographically representative sample of women 60 and older in the United States

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** While there has been increasing interest in older adults' sexuality, the literature to date has largely ignored sex toy use. This study investigated sex toy use in partnered sex and masturbation among older adult women.

**Methods:** A survey was fielded in October 2023 among a national demographically representative sample (N = 3,001). Participants had to be at least 60 years old, identify as a woman, and be living in the United States.

**Results:** Most of the survey participants were 60-69 years old (67.1%). Participants reported much greater use of sex toys during masturbation than during sex with a partner. Of the women who reported masturbating at least once in the last year, 46.4% used toys almost always or always during masturbation, compared with 5.1% who used sex toys almost always or always during partnered sex. Those who reported almost always or always using sex toys during masturbation were significantly more likely to report always or almost always having an orgasm compared with the lower frequency sex toy users. Of those who had partnered sex, 38.7% reported using sex toys during partnered sex at least rarely. Those who reported almost always or always using sex toys during partnered sex were more likely to report always or almost always having an orgasm compared with the lower frequency sex toy users.

**Conclusions:** Given the prevalence of masturbation and sex toy use as well as their relationships to orgasm, older women could benefit from information from health care professionals on these topics.

**Key Words:** Masturbation, Orgasm, Sex toys.

(*Menopause* 2026;33:000–000)

Received for publication May 9, 2025; accepted August 11, 2025.

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Funding/support: None reported.

Financial disclosure/conflicts of interest: None reported.

Select preliminary results from this study were presented at the 2024 annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, November 13-17, 2024, San Diego, CA.

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eISSN: 1530-0374

DOI: 10.1097/GME.0000000000002679

## BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

While for many years a neglected topic, research on sexuality among older adults has been growing in recent years.<sup>1-4</sup> Much of this research highlights that although older adults experience age-related changes in sexual functioning and report reduced frequency of partnered sexual activity, many nonetheless still consider their sexuality and intimacy with a partner (if in a relationship) important.<sup>5</sup> Sexual activity in later life contributes to better mental and physical health and is associated with a higher reported quality of life and relationships.<sup>6</sup> Information about older adults' sexual behaviors and desires is increasingly important as this population swells. Members of the Baby Boomer generation, for example, are approaching or have passed 70.<sup>7</sup>

## Masturbation

While there has been increasing interest in older adults' sexuality, the literature to date has focused on partnered sexual activity and not on solo sexual behavior.<sup>8</sup> Generally, women are less likely to masturbate than men,<sup>9-11</sup> and masturbation tends to be negatively associated with age.<sup>11</sup> Varying figures of masturbation frequency may be due to differences in cultural contexts, as there are many studies based in different countries. In one recent probability-based survey of European men and women aged 60-75 years, between 41%-65% of men and 27%-40% (depending on country) of women reported masturbating in the preceding month.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, some studies found that there are associations between masturbation frequency and other measures of well-being, such as sexual well-being/satisfaction.<sup>6-9</sup> The literature on the relationship between masturbation and sexual satisfaction is mixed. A recent review article<sup>12</sup> found that, for women, 40% of the identified studies reported no relationship between masturbation and sexual satisfaction, 33.3% a negative relation, and 26.7% a positive one. Overall, the research indicates that women are more likely to use masturbation as complementary to partnered sex, while men use it to compensate for lack of partnered sex.<sup>9,12,13</sup>

Other health outcomes may be related to masturbation in older adults, although the studies in this area have yielded inconsistent findings, with some studies reporting men with poorer health are more likely to report masturbation<sup>11</sup> and others finding no association.<sup>1,14</sup> In contrast, among women, one study reported a lower prevalence of masturbation among those in poorer

health<sup>14</sup> or no association.<sup>11</sup> Regarding cognitive function, Wright et al<sup>15</sup> using data from the English Longitudinal Study of Aging, found that for women, frequency of masturbation was linked to better word recall.

## Sex toys

Döring and Poeschl<sup>16</sup> surveyed 1,723 women and men in Germany (mean age: 42.7 y) and found that 53% of the women and 52% of the men had ever used sex toys in partnered sex; however, more women (53%) than men (37%) reported sex toy use during masturbation. In a study of 11,944 women and men from six European countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, France, UK; mean age: 42.0 y), 37% reported sex toy ownership; the most frequently owned sex toys were dildos and vibrators.<sup>17</sup>

Sex toy use may be increasing as sex toys become more mainstream and acceptable to use.<sup>16,18,19</sup> COVID-19 may also have influenced the use of sex toys, since reports indicated a spike in the sale of sex toys during the pandemic.<sup>20,21</sup> One US study found that when asked about the impact of the pandemic on their sex lives, one in five respondents reported expanding their sexual repertoire by adding new activities, including using a sex toy with a partner.<sup>22</sup>

Use of sex toys may increase sexual satisfaction, though research on this relationship is limited. In the above study of respondents from six European countries, sex toy ownership and use were significantly associated with higher sexual and life satisfaction.<sup>17</sup> Another study found that vibrator use significantly predicted greater sexual satisfaction among heterosexual and bisexual women, after controlling for age and partner's knowledge and liking of vibrator use.<sup>23</sup> In a study of an intervention designed to enhance sexual and relationship satisfaction that included prescribed sex toy use, over 75% of the 49 heterosexual couples enrolled reported increased sexual satisfaction after 6-8 weeks.<sup>24</sup>

There is also some evidence that with increasing age, individuals report engaging in more varied sexual acts, including sex toy use.<sup>19</sup> As penetrative sex may no longer be possible for some older adults (eg, because of erectile problems), alternative modes of sexual expression, including sex toy use, may replace intercourse.<sup>25,26</sup> As an increasing number of older women are living alone, whether due to divorce, widowhood, or the choice to be single,<sup>27</sup> it is possible that sex toys may become more important to older women and interestingly, sex toy companies are increasingly designing and marketing sex toys for seniors, including toys specifically aimed at menopausal women.<sup>28</sup>

## Previous literature on sex toy use among older adults

Previous studies have mainly examined sex toy use in general populations. While some have included older adults, the mean age in these samples tends to be under 60,<sup>18,29,30</sup> and most studies have not broken down their analyses by age. Thus, we know little about sex toy use among older adults.

One study<sup>31</sup> focused on older adults (50-85 y) analyzed vibrator and sex toy use as part of “sexual variety” during partnered sex. Sexual variety generally was associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction in older adults, but the authors did not examine the specific types of toys used or frequency of use. Participants in the subgroup of higher frequency of sex and higher sexual satisfaction were the most likely to report using a sex toy or vibrator with a partner. This study did not examine masturbation/solo sex. Similarly, a qualitative study by the same author found that older adults incorporated sexual variety during partnered sex, including sex toy use, to adapt to age-related physical changes.<sup>32</sup> To our knowledge, no studies have examined the relationship between frequency of sex toy use and desire for sex.

## Present study

The present study analyzed data from a demographically representative sample of women over 60 in the United States. Sex toy use was examined for two subsamples: (1) masturbation subsample—those who reported masturbation/self-stimulation at least once a year, and (2) partnered sex subsample—those who reported having “any sexual activity with another person(s) in the last year.” The following research questions were examined for each subsample:

- RQ1: What was the prevalence and frequency of current sex toy use?
- RQ2: Among those who used sex toys, what types of sex toys are used?
- RQ3: Was there an association between current frequency of sex toy use and current experience of orgasm?
- RQ4: Was there an association between current frequency of sex toy use and current desire to have more or less sex?

## Research design and methods

The survey was fielded in October 2023 by Prodege (<https://www.prodege.com>) among a national demographically representative sample of 3,001 women aged 60 years and older living in the United States. Prodege is a professional marketing, polling, and data collection site that uses opt-in Internet panels for a quota-based survey and that utilizes several techniques to ensure data quality and clean data. This includes removing data where participants provided straight-line responses, took the survey too quickly, and/or failed attention check questions. Prodege adheres to ESOMAR (European Society for Opinion and Market Research) industry standards of ethical and professional conduct for data-driven projects, including social research and data analytics.

## Participants

Prodege provided our research team with a de-identified data set of a national, demographically representative sample of 3,001 women aged 60 years and older living in the United States. Participants had to be at least

60 years old, identify as a woman, and be currently living in the United States. Although respondents could elect “prefer not to answer,” they had to complete all the questions on the survey to be included in the sample. If participants indicated that they preferred not to answer any questions, they were excluded from the analyses on a question-by-question basis.

## Measures

The survey questions were developed by a team of researchers at Indiana University. Some questions were also constructed from questions used in previous surveys.<sup>33,34</sup>

## Procedure

Informed consent was provided by respondents after clicking on an online link to an information sheet about the study that included information about potential risks and benefits, confidentiality, ability to withdraw from the study, and contact details of researchers in case they had questions. Potential volunteers were told that the purpose of the study was to better understand how older women negotiate their romantic and sexual lives and how this relates to their well-being. Respondents were also asked to ensure that they completed the survey in a setting where they had privacy. Completion of the survey took ~15–25 minutes. Compensation was provided by Prodege as per their usual payment schedule. Prodege pays between \$5 and \$10 USD to their panelists in the form of a gift card. The amount varies by how much a specific demographic group is needed to match the researcher’s request. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Indiana University (protocol number 20825).

## Data analysis

Those who reported masturbating at least once a year comprised the masturbation subsample. The partnered sex subsample was comprised of those who reported partnered sex (any sexual activity with another person[s]) in the last year. Analyses were conducted separately for the two subsamples. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for demographic characteristics of the full sample and the two analytic subsamples. Addressing RQ1 and RQ2, the distributions of frequencies of the sexual behaviors, as well as the distributions of frequency of orgasm, frequency of sex toy use, and percentages of the subsamples using various types of sex toys during those behaviors are reported in Tables 2 and 3 for the masturbation and partnered sex subsamples, respectively.  $\chi^2$  analyses were used to answer RQ3 and RQ4. For these, within each subsample, the frequency of sex toy use was recorded into three categories: (1) never, (2) rarely/sometimes, and (3) almost always/always. Orgasm frequency was recorded into three categories: (1) never/not any more, (2) rarely/sometimes, and (3) almost always/always. Statistical significance was defined by an alpha of 0.05. IBM SPSS was used for data analysis.

## RESULTS

### Masturbation subsample

The majority were in the 60–69 year-old age group (71.7%), were White (77.5%), and heterosexual (96.5%; see Table 1 for details on participant characteristics). As can be seen in Table 2, most participants (56.1%) reported having masturbated once a month to once a year. The large majority (77.7%) reported that they “always” or “almost always” reached orgasm during masturbation.

#### *RQ1: Prevalence and frequency of sex toy use*

56.4% reported using sex toys during masturbation at least rarely. Among those who had used sex toys during masturbation, 46.4% reported using toys almost always or always (Table 2).

#### *RQ2: Types of sex toys used*

Nearly all respondents who reported using a sex toy during masturbation used an external vibrator (63.5%) or a dildo/penetrative toy (44.3%). Respondents were able to select all that applied for type of sex toy (see Table 2 for the list of toys used).

#### *RQ3: Association between sex toy use and experience of orgasm?*

Those who reported almost always or always using sex toys during masturbation (83.8%) were significantly more likely to report always or almost always having an orgasm compared with the lower frequency sex toy users (83.4% vs 75.3% for those who used them rarely/sometimes and 74.3% for those who never used sex toys [ $X^2$  (df 4) = 20.98,  $P < 0.001$ ]).

#### *RQ4: Association between current frequency of sex toy use and current desire to have more or less sex*

Compared with those who never used sex toys during masturbation, those who used sex toys during masturbation (always/almost always or rarely/sometimes) were significantly more likely to report desiring more sex and significantly less likely to report being satisfied with the current amount ( $X^2$  [df 4] = 21.64,  $P < 0.001$ ). Desiring more sex was reported by 56.1% of those who always/almost always used sex toys and 49.4% of those who used sex toys rarely/sometimes, compared with 41.2% of those who never used sex toys during masturbation (Fig. 1).

### Partnered sex subsample

Of the participants, 20.9% ( $n = 612$ ) reported partnered sex in the last year. The majority were in the 60–69-year-old age group ( $n = 469$ ; 76.6%), were White ( $n = 503$ ; 83.1%), and heterosexual ( $n = 585$ ; 96.9%; see Table 1 for details on all participant characteristics). Most participants (66.7%) reported having partnered sex once a year to a few times a month. More than half (57.0%) reported always or almost always reaching orgasm during partnered sex.

#### *RQ1: Prevalence and frequency of sex toy use*

Of those who had partner sex, 38.7% of participants reported using sex toys during partnered sex at least rarely. Among those who had used sex toys during partnered sex, only 5.1% reported using toys almost always or always (Table 2).

**TABLE 1.** Demographic characteristics for the full sample (N = 3,001), masturbation subsample (n = 1,451), and partnered sex subsample (n = 612)

| Variable                                              | n (%)        |                        |                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
|                                                       | Full sample  | Masturbation subsample | Partnered sex subsample |
| Age (y)                                               |              |                        |                         |
| 60-69                                                 | 2,014 (67.1) | 1,040 (71.7)           | 469 (76.6)              |
| 70+                                                   | 987 (32.9)   | 411 (28.3)             | 143 (23.4)              |
| Race                                                  |              |                        |                         |
| Asian                                                 | 91 (3.0)     | 36 (2.5)               | 9 (1.5)                 |
| Black or African American                             | 493 (16.5)   | 231 (16.0)             | 79 (12.9)               |
| Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native         | 30 (1.0)     | 17 (1.2)               | 4 (0.7)                 |
| Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander             | 4 (0.1)      | 2 (0.1)                | 1 (0.2)                 |
| White                                                 | 2,298 (76.7) | 1,121 (77.4)           | 507 (82.8)              |
| Multiracial                                           | 48 (1.5)     | 26 (1.8)               | 7 (1.1)                 |
| Another race not specified above                      | 31 (1.0)     | 15 (1.0)               | 5 (0.8)                 |
| Hispanic                                              | 162 (5.4)    | 76 (5.2)               | 26 (4.3)                |
| Sexual orientation                                    |              |                        |                         |
| Straight /heterosexual                                | 2,912 (97.5) | 1,398 (96.5)           | 592 (96.5)              |
| Gay/lesbian                                           | 31 (1.0)     | 23 (1.6)               | 4 (0.7)                 |
| Bisexual                                              | 25 (0.8)     | 20 (1.4)               | 13 (2.1)                |
| Asexual                                               | 14 (0.5)     | 4 (0.3)                | 0 (0)                   |
| Another identity                                      | 4 (0.2)      | 3 (0.2)                | 2 (0.3)                 |
| Relationship status                                   |              |                        |                         |
| Not in a relationship (single or dating)              | 1,430 (48.2) | 698 (48.5)             | 161 (26.4)              |
| In a relationship (committed or another relationship) | 1,539 (51.8) | 742 (51.5)             | 449 (73.4)              |
| Married (only asked of those in relationships)        | 1,327 (86.6) | 624 (84.6)             | 390 (87.1)              |

*RQ2: Types of sex toys used*

The majority (62.4%) reported using an external vibrator. The next most frequently used type of toy was a dildo/penetrative toy (47.9%; Table 2).

*RQ3: Association between sex toy use and experience of orgasm*

There was a trend for an association between more frequent sex toy use and more frequent orgasm during partnered sex ( $X^2$  [df 4] = 9.34,  $P$  = 0.053). Those who reported almost always or always using sex toys during partnered sex were more likely to report always or almost always having an orgasm compared with the lower frequency sex toy users (64.5% vs 58.7% for those who used them rarely/sometimes and 55.2% for those who never used sex toys).

*RQ4: Association between current frequency of sex toy use and current desire to have more or less sex*

For partnered sex, there was no significant relationship between current frequency of sex toy use and whether participants desired more or less sex.

## DISCUSSION

### Prevalence, frequency and type of sex toy used

Our respondents reported much greater use of sex toys during masturbation than during sex with a partner. Of the women who reported masturbating at least once in the last year, a majority (56.4%) reported having used sex toys at least rarely (ie, not “never”) and a sizeable proportion (46.4%) used toys almost always or always during masturbation. In contrast, for the subsample of respondents who reported some partnered sex in the last year (N = 612), a smaller proportion (38.7%) reported

using toys at least rarely during partnered sex, and interestingly, only 5.1% used sex toys almost always or always.

Our findings related to the most frequent type of sex toys used by our sample (external vibrators and dildos/penetrative toys) are consistent with previous research on mixed-age samples.<sup>16,17</sup> Notably, the proportions who used external vibrators and dildos/penetrative toys were almost identical in the masturbation and partnered sex subsamples, suggesting that preferences for types of sex toys used during self-stimulation and sex with a partner are similar. This may indicate that older women use sex toys during masturbation as a substitute for partnered sex, but more research is needed to explore this hypothesis.

### Associations between frequency of sex toy use and orgasm and desire to have more/less sex

Regarding associations between frequency of sex toy use and experience of orgasm, there was a different pattern of results for the masturbation and partnered sex subsamples. Compared with respondents who used sex toys only rarely/sometimes during masturbation, a significantly greater proportion of women who almost always or always used sex toys during masturbation also reported almost always or always experiencing an orgasm. In contrast, among the partnered sex subsample, the association between frequency of sex toy use with a partner and frequency of orgasm was less apparent. Specifically, there was only a trend for women who frequently used sex toys with a partner to reach orgasm more often compared with those who rarely/sometimes used sex toys. The reasons why sex toy use would more likely enhance women’s ability to reach orgasm during

**TABLE 2.** Sex toy use, orgasm, and desire for more or less sex among those who reported masturbation

|                                                                                  | n (valid %) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| How often do you masturbate/self-stimulate?                                      | 1,451       |
| Once a year                                                                      | 89 (6.1)    |
| A few times a year                                                               | 528 (36.4)  |
| Once a month                                                                     | 197 (13.6)  |
| A few times a month                                                              | 394 (27.2)  |
| Once a week                                                                      | 93 (6.4)    |
| A few times a week                                                               | 137 (9.4)   |
| Once a day                                                                       | 10 (0.7)    |
| More than once a day                                                             | 3 (0.2)     |
| How often do you orgasm when you masturbate?                                     | 1,443       |
| Always                                                                           | 649 (45.0)  |
| Almost always                                                                    | 462 (32.0)  |
| Sometimes                                                                        | 238 (16.5)  |
| Rarely                                                                           | 55 (3.8)    |
| I no longer have orgasms                                                         | 23 (1.6)    |
| I have never had an orgasm                                                       | 16 (1.1)    |
| Prefer not to answer                                                             | 8 (NA)      |
| When you masturbate, how often do you use sex toys (eg, vibrators, dildos, etc)? | 1,448       |
| Never                                                                            | 630 (43.6)  |
| Rarely                                                                           | 199 (13.8)  |
| Sometimes                                                                        | 237 (16.4)  |
| Almost Always                                                                    | 166 (11.5)  |
| Always                                                                           | 212 (14.7)  |
| Prefer not to answer                                                             | 4 (NA)      |
| Sex toy use during masturbation at least rarely                                  | 814 (56.4)  |
| What types of sex toys do you use when you masturbate?                           | 814         |
| Check all that apply                                                             |             |
| Anal plug/toy                                                                    | 15 (1.8)    |
| Bondage toys/equipment                                                           | 7 (0.9)     |
| Cock ring                                                                        | 3 (0.4)     |
| Dildo/penetrative toy                                                            | 364 (44.7)  |
| External vibrator                                                                | 524 (64.4)  |
| Masturbation sleeve                                                              | 3 (0.4)     |
| Other                                                                            | 39 (4.8)    |
| Prefer not to answer                                                             | 47 (5.8)    |
| How often do you orgasm when you masturbate?                                     | 1,443       |
| Always                                                                           | 649 (45.0)  |
| Almost always                                                                    | 462 (32.0)  |
| Sometimes                                                                        | 238 (16.5)  |
| Rarely                                                                           | 55 (3.8)    |
| I no longer have orgasms                                                         | 23 (1.6)    |
| I have never had an orgasm                                                       | 16 (1.1)    |
| Prefer not to answer                                                             | 8 (NA)      |
| How do you feel about the amount of sex you are having?                          | 1,451       |
| I would like to have less sex                                                    | 38 (2.8)    |
| I am satisfied with the amount of sex                                            | 682 (49.5)  |
| I would like to have more sex                                                    | 657 (47.7)  |
| Prefer not to answer                                                             | 74 (NA)     |

NA, not available.

self-stimulation than during partnered sex may be related to motivations to use sex toys, which might be different during masturbation than during sex with a partner. Sex toy use during partnered sex might also have been initiated by male partners (96.5% of our respondents identified as heterosexual) rather than by the women themselves. There has been little research on motivations to use sex toys. Additional research, particularly qualitative studies, could shed light on these possible explanations.

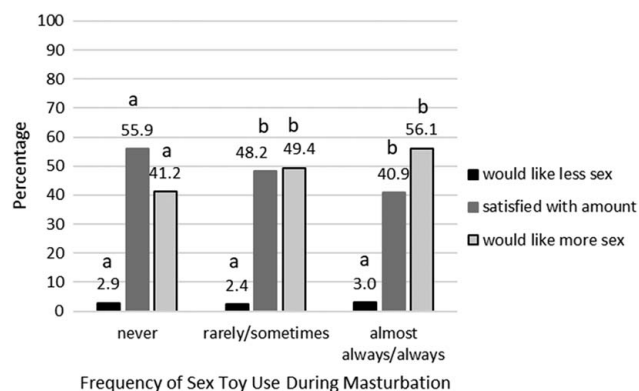
The findings on associations between frequency of sex toy use and current desire to have more/less sex also differed

**TABLE 3.** Sex toy use, orgasm, and desire for more or less sex among those who reported partnered sex in the past year

|                                                                                          | n (valid %) |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Approximately how often do you have partnered sex?                                       | 612         |
| Once a year                                                                              | 14 (2.4)    |
| A few times a year                                                                       | 99 (16.7)   |
| Once a month                                                                             | 79 (13.3)   |
| A few times a month                                                                      | 203 (34.3)  |
| Once a week                                                                              | 81 (13.7)   |
| A few times a week                                                                       | 102 (17.2)  |
| Once a day                                                                               | 4 (0.7)     |
| More than once a day                                                                     | 10 (1.7)    |
| Prefer not to answer                                                                     | 20 (NA)     |
| When you have partnered sex, how often do you use sex toys (eg, vibrators, dildos, etc)? | 612         |
| Never                                                                                    | 371 (61.3)  |
| Rarely                                                                                   | 98 (16.2)   |
| Sometimes                                                                                | 105 (17.4)  |
| Almost always                                                                            | 19 (3.1)    |
| Always                                                                                   | 12 (2.0)    |
| Prefer not to answer                                                                     | 7 (NA)      |
| What types of sex toys do you use when you have partnered sex? Check all that apply      | 612         |
| Anal plug/toy                                                                            | 14 (6.0)    |
| Bondage toys/equipment                                                                   | 17 (7.3)    |
| Cock ring                                                                                | 24 (10.3)   |
| Dildo/penetrative toy                                                                    | 112 (47.9)  |
| External vibrator                                                                        | 146 (62.4)  |
| Masturbation sleeve                                                                      | 3 (1.3)     |
| Other                                                                                    | 13 (5.6)    |
| Prefer not to answer                                                                     | 17 (7.3)    |
| How often do you orgasm during partnered sex?                                            | 612         |
| Never                                                                                    | 36 (6.0)    |
| Rarely                                                                                   | 65 (10.8)   |
| Sometimes                                                                                | 157 (26.1)  |
| Almost always                                                                            | 232 (38.5)  |
| Always                                                                                   | 112 (18.6)  |
| Prefer not to answer                                                                     | 10 (NA)     |
| How do you feel about the amount of sex you are having?                                  | 612         |
| I would like to have less sex                                                            | 33 (5.5)    |
| I am satisfied with the amount of sex                                                    | 374 (61.9)  |
| I would like to have more sex                                                            | 197 (32.6)  |
| Prefer not to answer                                                                     | 8 (NA)      |

NA, not available.

when examining the masturbation versus the partnered sex subsamples. For the masturbation group, those who used sex toys with any frequency (ie, either almost always/always or rarely/sometimes) were significantly more likely to report desiring more sex compared with those who never used sex toys during masturbation. In contrast, for the partnered sex subsample, there was no significant association between frequency of sex toy use and desire for more or less sex. It is possible that the association between the use of sex toys during masturbation and wanting to have more sexual activity than currently might reflect some experience of unsatisfactory partnered sexual activity and wanting to compensate for this. However, although not specifically related to sex toy use, reporting more frequent masturbation has been associated with more frequent sexual activity and feeling more comfortable discussing sex with partners among women (but not men), rather than with unsatisfactory sexual experiences.<sup>13</sup>



**FIG. 1.** Relationship between satisfaction with amount of sex and frequency of sex toy use during masturbation. Letters a and b indicate significant difference. Bars that share a letter are not significantly different. Bars that do not share a letter are significantly different.

## Clinical implications

Our findings have several important implications. Higher frequency of sex toy use during masturbation was correlated with higher frequency of orgasm. Previous studies have found relationships between orgasm and various health benefits, including pain relief, improved sleep, and reduced stress and depression (for review, refer to the study by Gianotten et al<sup>35</sup>). Promoting sex toy use among older adults could improve health outcomes, though additional research is required in this area.

Older women could benefit from information from health care professionals about sex, masturbation, and orgasm. Studies indicate, however, that only a small proportion of older adults seek professional help for sexual concerns. In one probability survey across six European countries, only 6.8% of women (vs 12% of men) had sought help for any sexual difficulty in the past five years.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, research has also shown that health care professionals seldom discuss sex and sexuality with their patients.<sup>37-39</sup> One study of men and women (mean age 81 y) found that only 7% of women reported that their health care provider had ever initiated discussion of any sexuality related topics, in comparison with 32% of men.<sup>38</sup> Another study found that professionals involved in palliative care generally did not speak with their patients about sexuality, which may be due to ageist, ableist, and/or heterosexist views of this population.<sup>39</sup> While sex toys may be becoming more acceptable,<sup>16,17</sup> there may still be some stigma associated with their purchase and use (perhaps particularly among women), and health care professionals may serve a “permission-giving” role. Information about masturbation, sex toy use, and orgasm among older adults should be included in medical education to improve comfort with discussing these issues with patients. Tailored websites for older women that provide information and promote healthy sexuality should also be developed.<sup>40</sup>

## Strengths, limitations, and future research

This study provides novel insights into an under-researched behavior: sex toy use among older adult

women. The older adult demographic deserves particular attention because of their unique experiences in the face of combined age-related health issues and ageist assumptions about their sexual desires and needs.

Another strength of the current study was the relatively large and demographically representative sample of women over 60 years and older in the United States. Limitations include the fact that almost all of our respondents (96.5%) identified as heterosexual, predominantly White, and the sample was also US-based. Future research should explore beyond heterosexual and cisgender populations and recruit samples from different countries. In one study, higher rates of sex toy use were reported by bisexual and lesbian and gay individuals.<sup>16</sup> There are data to suggest that more people overall in the United States are identifying as LGBTQ+,<sup>41</sup> and as they age, it will be increasingly important to understand sexual behaviors, including sex toy use, among older LGBTQ+ adults. Men could also be included in future research on older adults and sex toy use.

Beyond orgasm, other variables related to sexual satisfaction more broadly were limited in this survey. Validated measures of sexual satisfaction and of sexual well-being<sup>6</sup> could be included in future studies. This may lead to the discovery of stronger associations between sex toy use and sexual satisfaction among older adults.

## CONCLUSIONS

As one of the first studies of its kind, these findings provide a starting point for additional research to improve understanding of sex toy use and orgasm among older adults. Rather than supporting ageist assumptions about lack of interest in sex toys or orgasm among older adults, this study demonstrates that many older adults use sex toys and that their use promotes orgasm. In this regard, there may be more similarities than differences between younger and older adults. Orgasm, in turn, may promote positive health outcomes that could improve overall health and well-being in older adults. These topics deserve additional attention and investigation.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*The authors thank Justin Garcia, Justin Lehmler, and Lauren Streicher for their input on developing the survey questions.*

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