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Reproductive health and wellbeing: Risk and vulnerability for midlife, heterosexual women in new, non-monogamous, or casual sexual relationships

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Aim: The rate of sexually transmitted infections amongst midlife and older people in New Zealand, Britain, United States and Australia is rising. Popular culture increasingly celebrates a heightened sexuality for women in this population group. However, depictions of sexually savvy 'cougars' are at odds with reality for many women. International literature highlights that these women are often ill-equipped to negotiate safer sex and condom use, instead focusing on pleasing men and attributing their silence to spontaneity. This study aimed to explore the enablers and barriers to safer heterosexual sex as perceived by midlife and older New Zealand women.

Methods: This qualitative study, examine women's perspectives of vulnerability and sexual risk taking behavior. Eight single women aged 40-69 participated in individual, in-depth interviews. Interpretative phenomenology was utilized and the analysis was supported by the theory of gender and power.

Findings: Analysis indicated that these women held misconceptions about STI transmission were not aware of sexual health promotion literature and had not discussed sexual health with their GPs. The women described valuing their own pleasure and their distaste for condom use, but data emphasized that women predominantly aligned their choices with men's preferences. The data also highlighted that, from the women's perspective, alcohol consumption was an important factor in safer sex decision making.

Conclusion: This study highlights that midlife women are both ill-informed and vulnerable with regards to sexual health.

Biography

Trish Morison has completed her PGDip and Master's in Public Health. She is currently pursuing a PhD. She is employed as a Senior Lecturer in Anatomy and Physiology at the Universal College of Learning. Her research outputs include a published article in the *New Zealand Journal of Primary Health Care* and was a guest speaker at this year's World Primary Health Care Conference in Dubai.

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