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When pregnancy is no longer the issue

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The rate of sexually transmitted infections amongst midlife and older heterosexual women in New Zealand is rising. Popular culture celebrates a heightened sexuality for 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. The study aimed to explore the enablers and barriers to safer heterosexual sex as perceived by midlife and older New Zealand women, who are re-partnering or in casual relationships. This qualitative study utilized Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis, supported by the theory of gender and power, to examine the gender-normative assumptions and behaviors in women's accounts of unprotected sex. Eight single women aged 40-69 participated in individual, in-depth interviews. Analysis indicated that these women held misconceptions about STI transmission but had not sought educational material, nor discussed their sexual health with clinicians. Results highlighted women's ambivalence about prioritizing safer sex, preferring to comply with partners' wishes, particularly when under the influence of alcohol. 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. This study highlights that midlife women are both ill-informed and vulnerable with regards to sexual health. Primary healthcare clinicians are well placed to provide education and sexual health advice.

Biography

Trish Morison has completed a Master's degree in Public Health. Her research was published in the *New Zealand Journal of Primary Health Care*. She has lectured in Anatomy, Physiology and Pharmacology for the last 14 years.

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