ABSTRACT | OBJECTIVE: To understand the experiences of women in old age in relation to sexuality. METHOD: An integrative review carried out through five steps described by Cooper. The search was carried out in the LILACS, BDENF and SCIELO databases, using the descriptors women’s health, health of the elderly, nursing, seniors, and sexuality. 18 articles were including. RESULTS: It was found in the elderly women the reduction or inexistence of behaviors related to sexuality; existence of prejudices, myths and social taboos and oppressive culture; maintaining sexual practices to maintain marriage; verification of unsafe sexual experiences and practices, related to the non-use of condoms; understanding that sexuality involves affective and emotional aspects, in addition to the sexual act. Positive and negative factors related to the experience of sexuality by elderly women were also identified. CONCLUSION: There was a higher prevalence of negative factors related to the experience of sexuality by these women than positive factors. There are few studies that demonstrate the full experience of sexuality and the impacts on the quality of life of women in old age.

Introduction

Aging is a non-pathological, sequential and irreversible process of changes in the human organism takes place in an individual and cumulative way. It is a natural evolution of the organism through its deterioration, considered the last phase of the life cycle, which involves social withdrawal, psychomotor and cognitive losses, and restriction in social roles.

For many older adults, old age is related to negative aspects such as lack of vitality, fatigue, illness, isolation and disability, and it is conceived and directly associated with disease, degradation of body image, loss of self-esteem, decreased libido, uselessness, family distancing, and death.

When the aging process occurs successfully, the older adult is able to adapt to new limitations, maintaining some degree of satisfaction in life. Among other ways of promoting active and successful aging, sexual practice is a favorable activity, even with reduced frequency.

The decrease in the frequency of sexual intercourse can be related to advancing age, use of medications, existence of pathologies, and decreased sexual desire. For the elderly woman, the physical and hormonal transformations and the religious and cultural patterns, family oppression and individual particularities consolidate the social stigma of the impossibility of her own attractive view and her ability to seduce and fully experience sexuality.

Sexuality is considered a set of behaviors that involves feelings, caresses, and words, among other aspects, and not only the relationship or sexual act itself. This theme goes beyond the "physical or organic issue, but it has a great influence on the psychological aspect and how individuals can exercise their sexual activity in the course of their lives".

However, it should be considered that the active maintenance of sexuality in older adults has shown an increase in cases of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), in many cases due to the negligence of this population in relation to preventive methods, in addition to aspects related to health education and promotion.

In view of this, this study is justified in the need to understand how elderly women mean sexuality in old age, seeking to improve the quality of life and to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, in view of the high rates of STIs in this stage of life. This study had the following as guiding question: How is sexuality presented from the perspective of women in old age? The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of women of an advanced age in relation to sexuality.

Method

This is an integrative review that, according to Cooper, must be carried out in five consecutive stages: formulation of the problem, data collection, data evaluation, analysis and interpretation of the collected data, and public presentation.

This research was carried out through the search for scientific articles in the database of the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Science and Health (LILACS), and the Nursing Database (BDENF), using the following Health Sciences Descriptors (Descritores em Ciências da Saúde, DeCS) for the search: Saúde da Mulher (Women's Health), Saúde do Idoso (Health of the Older Adult), Enfermagem (Nursing), Terceira Idade (Old Age), and Sexualidade (Sexuality). The Boolean operator "AND" was used in the following combinations of descriptors: women's health AND sexuality; health of the older adult AND sexuality; women's health AND old age. The inclusion criteria were articles that answered the guiding question, available in the databases free of charge and entirely in Portuguese, published in the last ten years (between 2008 and 2018). The exclusion criteria included theses, dissertations, monographs, and journalistic reports.

Data collection took place from March to April 2019. 3,216 articles were identified in the initial search, 1,566 in the LILACS database, 871 in BDENF, and 776 in Scielo. After selection according to the inclusion, title and duplicity criteria, 3,190 articles were excluded, leaving 295 articles and, after reading the abstracts, 247 were excluded for not answering the guiding question, leaving 48 articles. Finally, after proceeding with the complete reading of the pre-selected articles, 18 were included in this integrative review.
To perform data evaluation, a data organization form was used for the data of the articles included in the study, and its analysis and interpretation occurred through the synthesis, comparison, and discussion of the data through a synoptic chart. The results were presented in a descriptive manner through their synthesis. This study fully maintained the articles and data from electronic databases, preserving the authors and respecting the copyrights according to Law No. 12,853, of August 14th, 2013.

**Results**

Chart 1 presents the description of the articles included in this integrative review.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>AUTHORS</th>
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<th>RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH STUDIES</th>
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| A1   | Arcoverde MAM, Labronici, LM¹⁰ | Faces ocultas da sexualidade emergente de idosos: um estudo fenomenológico. | • Transcendence of the biological view of sex;  
• Sexuality with companionship. |
| A2   | Rodrigues DMMR, Labegalini CMG, Higashki IH, Heidemann ITSB, Baldissera VDA¹¹ | O Percursando educativo dialógico como estratégia de cuidado com mulheres idosas na sexualidade. | • Concept of sexuality related to intercourse;  
• Experiencing sexuality as a practice of young women;  
• Existence of preconceptions. |
| A3   | Burigo GF, Fachini IH, Garetti B, Streicher CCI, Rosa RS¹² | Sexualidade e comportamento de idosos vulneráveis a doenças sexualmente transmissíveis. | • Unsafe sexual experiences and practices;  
• Vulnerability to STIs. |
| A4   | Moreira TM, Parreira BDM, Diniz MA, Silva SR¹³ | Conhecimento das mulheres idosas sobre doenças sexualmente transmissíveis, conhecimento, uso e acesso aos métodos preventivos. | • Medium level knowledge of the STIs and of prevention means, with no habit of condom use. |
| A5   | Marques ADB, Silva RP, Sousa SS, Santana RS, Deus SRM; Amorim RF¹⁴ | A vivência da sexualidade de idosos em um centro de convivência. | • Active sexuality, apart from the practice of sex, involving feelings. |
| A6   | Cunha LM, Mota WS, Gomes SC, Ribeiro FMA, Bezerra IMP, Machado MFAS, Quirino GS¹⁵ | Vovó e vovó também amam: sexualidade na terceira idade | • Difficulty in approaching the subject matter in the consultations with elderly women. |
| A7   | Frugoli A, Magalhães JCAO¹⁶ | A sexualidade na terceira idade na percepção de um grupo de idosas e indicações para a educação sexual. | • Sexuality and intercourse as synonyms;  
• Possibility of an active and healthy sex life;  
• Not using condoms after the age of 60;  
• Doubts, fears, and preconceptions on the theme;  
• Limited experience of sexuality. |
| A8   | Coelho DNP, Daher DV, Santana RF, Santo FHE¹ | Percepção de mulheres idosas sobre sexualidade: implicações de gênero e no cuidado de enfermagem. | • Difficulty in expressing sexuality;  
• Experience of conflicts, confusing sex, sexual relation, and sexuality. |
| A9   | Oliveira EL, Neves ALM, Silva IR¹⁷ | Sentidos de sexualidade entre mulheres idosas: relações de gênero, ideologias mecanicistas e subversões. | • Sex as an obligation;  
• Lack of desire X Existence of sexual desire. |
| A10  | Pereira D, Ponte F, Costa E¹⁸ | Preditores das atitudes negativas face ao envelhecimento e face à sexualidade na terceira idade. | • Presence of negative attitudes towards aging and less permissive attitudes towards sexuality in old age. |
| A11  | Uchôa YS, Costa DCA, Silva JIA P, Silva STSE, Freitas WMTM, Soares SCS² | A sexualidade sob o olhar da pessoa idosa. | • The myth that older adults are asexual due to: lack of information, physiological changes, and preconceptions. |
| A12  | Alencar DL, Marques, APO, Leal MCC, Vieiro JCM¹⁹ | Exercício da sexualidade em pessoas idosas e os fatores relacionados. | • Sexuality related to genitality;  
• Existence of sexual activity;  
• Self-erosion. |
| A13  | Queiroz MAC, Lourenço RME, Coelho MMF, Miranda KCL, Barbosa RGB | Representações sociais da sexualidade entre idosos. | • Love, respect and affection are central elements of sexuality in old age. |
When performing the technique of content analysis of the articles found and included in the study, it was possible to verify 10 axes pointed out by elderly women as determinants and related to the experience of sexuality by them. Positive and negative factors related to the experience of sexuality by elderly women were also identified, shown in Chart 2.

When performing the technique of content analysis of the articles found and included in the study, it was possible to verify 10 axes pointed out by elderly women as determinants and related to the experience of sexuality by them. Positive and negative factors related to the experience of sexuality by elderly women were also identified, shown in Chart 2.
Among the factors surveyed in the research, there was prevalence of negative factors related to the experience of sexuality by elderly women, which is very linked to culture and prejudice, with society having attributed sexuality to the sexual act itself, which is compromised with advanced; however, any form of exercising sexuality must be valued and introduced into the unique daily lives of adult women in order to preserve their human nature and privacy.

The fact of experiencing sexuality in old age cannot be a reason for embarrassment by the older adults; on the contrary, it must be taken into account that this phase of life leads to a decrease in libido and female sex hormones, which can cause decreased sexual desire and not limit their desires and will in relation to sexuality.

**Discussion**

The reduction in the number of sexuality experiences in the older adults was mentioned in nine studies (A2, A7, A8, A9, A11, A15, A16, A17 and A18). Ribeiro, Alves and Meira26 associate factors related to the reproductive system of women in old age with the decrease in the pattern of sexual activity, justified by the climacteric, due to the failure of the ovarian function, with decreased steroid production and absence of ovulation, as well as that reduced libido is attributed, among other factors, to vaginal atrophy, loss of roughness and reduction of vaginal secretion, causing dyspareunia and decreased sensation of pleasure.

Alencar et al.27 add that the elderly woman's bodily and psychological changes can generate dissatisfaction with her own body image, reflecting on the non-acceptance of herself, generating the refusal to experience sexuality.

Of the studies evaluated, five (A2, A7, A8, A9 and A12) reported that elderly women associate sexuality with the sexual act itself, that is, coitus. Bastos et al.28 and Vieira, Coutinho and Saraiva1 associate this finding due to its characteristic of a physiological function, failing to consider other means of expression of sexuality, such as expressions of affection, fondness, tenderness and companionship.

The existence of preconceptions regarding the experience of sexuality associated with aging by the older adults themselves, their families, and society was presented by nine studies (A2, A6, A7, A8, A9, A10, A11, A15 and A16). In this sense, Almeida and Lourenço24 related these preconceptions to stereotypes of unattractive physical appearance, lack of interest and sensitivity to sexual stimuli, as well as to lack of information, which lead to pessimistic attitudes.

Society categorizes this period of life as asexual, with prejudice against the elderly woman herself and her family, which does not tolerate the maintenance of loving relationships among their older adults, with children being the first to deny their parents' sexuality, associating sexuality with a sign of dementia25.

Unsafe sexual experiences and practices, especially related to not using condoms, making women more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, were presented in three studies (A3, A4 and A7).

Low adherence to condom use can be related to the absence of this prevention device in the act of sexual practice by the older adults, or to lack of dexterity in its use, causing slowness, which, in the older adult's view, can hinder the intimate occasion. Especially in relation to women in old age, the arguments are related to the lack of concern with contraception, difficulty in negotiation between partners, as well as to the trust established between marriage and a stable relationship, assuming that they can give up condom use during sexual relations, generating greater vulnerability to STD/HIV infections31-33.

Dornelas Neto et al36 add that the increase in exposure to risky situations due to divorce cases and to widowhood, the search for sexual partners on social networks and websites and the increase in sex tourism/trade, as well as the physiological changes resulting from the aging process, can contribute to the increased risk of vulnerability to STDs/HIV.

Cezar, Aires and Paz35 emphasize the importance of developing public health programs aimed specifically at the older adults, in order to clarify doubts related to sexuality and the prevention of STDs, allowing them to adopt healthier and safer practices related to the experience of sexuality, mainly with the scenario where there is an increase in life expectancy36.
The continuity of sexual practices conceived as an obligation of marriage and not out of desire was pointed out by two studies (A9, A12). Ferreira et al.\textsuperscript{37} revealed that women maintain sexual relations due to their obligation as wives/partners and have the understanding that if they do not fulfill their obligation, the husband/partner will seek this satisfaction in sexual relationships or practices outside of marriage, as well as Berger\textsuperscript{38} reports that the adults justify the importance of sexual intercourse to maintain their partner.

The existence of the oppressive culture of society and the family in relation to the experience of sexuality in elderly women was pointed out by four studies (A7, A10, A11 and A16). Baldissera and Bueno\textsuperscript{39} reveal that they had difficulties in approaching the theme of sexuality, because in the speech of elderly women there are taboos and myths, as well as the social representation of not talking about sex, as a socially constructed practice.

Most of the elderly women are ashamed to assume that they have an active sex life, mainly because family and society discourage them, and the media exhibits the experience of sexuality by the older adults as pejorative\textsuperscript{40}.

Regarding the positive factors for the experience of sexuality, the maintenance of active sexuality by elderly women is pointed out as a positive aspect for the experience of sexuality by four studies (A5, A7, A12, A14). This appreciation is also presented by Correia et al.\textsuperscript{41}, who relate general well-being to satisfactory sexual health, and consider it an important and fundamental factor for quality of life. Elderly women recognize that the experience of sexuality provides physical and psychological well-being, and contributes to the reduction of physical and mental health problems associated with aging\textsuperscript{42}.

The experience of sexuality associated with affective and emotional involvement was presented by six studies (A1, A5, A13, A15, A17, A18). Vieira, Coutinho and Saraiva\textsuperscript{1} denote that this experience of pleasure will only be achieved if there is affection in the relationship, involving caresses, touch, complicity, feelings and intimacy during sexual intercourse, going beyond the simple act.

Sexuality is not restricted to sexual intercourse, but it understands the interaction between affectivity, genitality, interpersonal relationship, a set of behaviors and feelings, requiring contact, intimacy and affection, being a language and means of expression of the human being, essential for the physical and emotional well-being of the older adults\textsuperscript{42}.

### Conclusion

With this study it was possible to show that the reduction or inexistence of moments involving sexuality among the adults and the causes can be related mainly to the association with the sexual act, to physical disability, to changes in body image, and to the pathologies developed in the aging process. The existence of preconceptions, myths and social taboos regarding the experience of sexuality and the concept of asexuality of elderly women prevents the fullness of sexuality, as well as the oppressive culture that exists in society.

A worrying factor was the finding of unsafe sexual experiences and practices, especially related to not using condoms, making elderly women more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases. The limitations of the study include the scarcity of research studies carried out at the national level with a focus on the sexuality of the older adults.

However, strategies aimed at promoting and preventing the health of elderly women must address this theme, aiming at the understanding by elderly women that sexuality involves more than the simple sexual act, but also affection and emotions, making their experience healthier in the face of the physical and psychological benefits provided, which can directly reflect on the quality of life of women in old age.
Author contributions
Chagas RSP participated in the conception, design, search and statistical analysis of the research data, interpretation of results, and writing of the scientific article. Cecchetto FH participated in the orientation, research data collection, data interpretation, and writing. Riegel F participated in the conception, design, interpretation of results, and writing of the scientific article.

Competing interests
No financial, legal or political conflicts involving third parties (government, companies and private foundations, etc.) have been declared for any aspect of the submitted paper (including, but not limited to, grants and funding, participation in advisory council, study design, preparation of manuscript, statistical analysis, etc.).

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