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By Ruth Ostrow

Professors, doctors and scientists at the International Conference on Healthy Ageing and Longevity (held in Australia each year and co-sponsored by the World Health Organisation) were talking in the corridors about the intelligence of keeping the body juicy into older years.

One leading scientist I interviewed said he believed sex was nature's own way of boosting estrogen and testosterone levels in menopausal women and ageing males. "It stands to reason that when you are sexually active the body recognises the need for certain hormones to be produced," said Dr Bradley Wilcox, whose work with people who have stayed healthy into their 100s is internationally acclaimed. These oldies themselves credited intimacy alongside good diet for their longevity.

A speaker at the conference, Australian sex therapist Jo-Anne Baker, said: "A recent study revealed that those who had sex an average of four times a week looked and felt 10 years younger than those who had less sex, due to the production of endorphins and other feel-good chemicals."

Baker acknowledged that most couples with young kids, mortgage woes and heavy work schedules may find it difficult to feel "in the mood" once a week, let alone four times - especially given that libido declines with age. But she said people needed to explore appetite stimulants to create the urge. These include fantasising, flirting and erotic play. "People wanting longevity and good health can't afford to let this area of life slip, even if they merely engage in self-love," she said.

Research to come out of past Healthy Ageing And Longevity conferences showed that sex helped produce more neurons in the brains of mice, and Professor Marc Cohen from RMIT telling us last year that rabbits cuddled by lab assistants lived 60 per cent longer than those which were not.

Touching the skin releases opiates; sex prompts the release of natural amphetamines which keep us stimulated and full of energy. There are also benefits associated with flushing of the skin, cleansing the lymphatic system, and something that molecular biologist Professor Suresh Rattan calls "good stress" - short-term stress on the body through physical activity which helps the immune system to kick in.

Love, sex and intimacy are the things that make the world go around. In terms of health, sex - like vegetables - is something we can never have too much of.

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