

Tuesday, Oct. 12, 2004

Click Here For Love

As older Americans grow more comfortable online, they're seeking e-romance in record numbers

By JEREMY CAPLAN

For 47 years, George Mynchenberg shared love letters and romantic dinners with his wife Beverly. "There was always just one woman in my life," he says. Now — eight years after her death — there are about 40.

The road from stalwart husband to bachelor about town wasn't a straight path. In 1997, a year after Beverly died, Mynchenberg met his second wife through a friend. But six years later, their marriage fell apart. "I thought, 'I'm 80. What the hell do I do now? I still want a companion.'" Mynchenberg finally tried a method that he never dreamed would suit him: online dating. He joined four e-dating services, which he refers to as "friendship clubs." Every morning in his waterfront home in Ormond Beach, Fla., Mynchenberg sits down at his computer and sifts through the profiles of dozens of women, searching for an intelligent 69-to-79-year-old Floridian with whom he can share conversation, travels and intimacy — but not marriage.

So far, Mynchenberg says, his effort is working. His romantic calendar is packed, with nine recent dates as evidence. "You can get a pretty good idea of what people look like [online], where they're from and what their pros and cons are," he says.

While e-dating has been around for nearly a decade — and many younger singles swear by its proven powers — an older singles set is just catching on. On [Match.com](#), one of the most popular online services, the number of singles over 50 has tripled since 2000, to 934,000. [SeniorFriendFinder.com](#)'s membership has likewise spiked from 95,000 in 2001 to over 313,000 today. As older Americans become increasingly comfortable with the Web and e-mail, many are expanding the range of their online activities to include cyber-romance.

That's why a dozen new sites catering to this burgeoning market have cropped up in the past few years. [SilverSingles.com](#), [SeniorsCircle.com](#) and Yahoo's ThirdAge Personals are among those that have grown steadily by focusing on an older age group. Most sites cost \$20 to \$30 a month. Others are free to join but charge for every e-mail or chat session. Unfortunately for older daters on modest incomes, an AARP membership doesn't buy any dating discounts online.

"Ten years ago, a lot of us didn't even know how to get online," says Alice Solomon, 67, founder of [GorgeousGrandma.com](#), a support site for aging single women, and author of

Find the Love of Your Life After 50. "But these days, among my peers, online dating has become the hottest thing since underwire bras."

Mynchenberg spends two hours a day on sites like [Match.com](#), [AmericanSingles.com](#) and SeniorFriendFinder [.com](#). And though he has already exchanged notes with 40 women, not all the subsequent meetings have turned out well. "One woman was way too rich. I couldn't afford to keep up with her," he says. "She wanted to hop on an airplane and fly off to Paris." Another woman, whom Mynchenberg liked very much, suffered from congestive heart failure and had to move in with her brother 40 miles away.

But for others, online romance has bloomed into love. Living in remote Malakoff, Texas, Frances Gaspar, 61, started e-dating because few eligible men lived nearby. Soon she found herself juggling dozens of e-mails from friendly Texans as far as 100 miles away. One of them, Bob, 63, drove for two hours to meet Gaspar for ice cream after courting her with jokey e-mails. "He wrote, 'I'm a registered massage therapist, but I won't rub you the wrong way,'" recalls Gaspar with a laugh.

At their first meeting, Gaspar noticed Bob's bad haircut, which she says looked as if it had been done using a bowl. But she loved his sense of humor. A year after she signed up online and 10 months after their first e-chat, Frances and Bob got hitched. "I had been a very private person, so online dating was a big step for me," says Gaspar, who had been widowed after 39 years of marriage. "But now it's all joy. We both feel like we're 20 again."

Some e-daters have learned to be skeptical of what they read. It's tempting for many roving the Web to gussy up personal details, such as age. Some exaggerate slightly, while others go way over the line. Women defend the age fib, arguing that men sometimes unfairly filter out potential mates above arbitrary age limits. "Online profiles often stretch the truth," Mynchenberg says, having looked at over 1,000 in the past few months. "Many women seem to include pictures taken at least a few years earlier, and they leave out their real age. I'm amazed by how many are stuck at 69."

On the other hand, many women quickly grow leery of leches who lurk on these sites. "Some fellows are married, others [are] interested only in sex, and there's even the occasional 16-year-old just kidding around," says Solomon. "But there are many who are very nice, and those are the ones you end up spending time with."

Like personal-ad services in print, Web personals have a raunchy side too. On [Lavalife.com](#), many men and women over 60 post ads in a section called Intimate Encounters. Using the screen name Cleopatra, for instance, a 70-year-old from Pennsylvania lists Tantric sex as her online objective. "Now is my time to 'make hay while the sun shines,'" her profile says. Even Mynchenberg says he recently joined [AdultFriendFinder.com](#), which he calls a "sexy" singles site, because many of the older members on other sites seem to want more romance and less sex.

Some sites help members avoid the pitfalls of online dating by offering specialized screening services. True.com, for example, is a new \$30-a-month dating service that checks public marital and criminal records to make sure that potential members are single nonfelons. And sites like rightstuffdating.com, SquareDating.com and GoodGenes.com invite only graduates of elite universities to join. (Although those sites check applicants' college records, there's no guarantee that the occasional Princeton imposter won't try to date up into the Ivies.) There are also ethnic and religious niche sites like JDate.com for Jewish singles and DharmaDate.com for Buddhists. For those seeking partners to ponder life's last, deepest questions, there's soulmatch.com.

With all these virtual hookup joints, online dating is connecting more than just singles looking for love. It's also bridging the generation gap between some grandparents and grandchildren. "My granddaughter left me a message one night complaining that I had so many more dates than she did," said a 73-year-old Floridian who goes by the name Classy Lady on JDate.com. Dubbing herself "the hottest gal in Boca," she teased her granddaughter about her abundant suitors and her nights on the town.

Mostly, however, virtual dating is boosting the confidence of many who long for companionship but have grown disillusioned with the old-fashioned ways of dating. At the offices of Match.com, an e-mail arrived recently in the company's success-story In box from a man who said that at 70, he was taking off on a cross-country honeymoon with a new sweetheart. "I know some seniors are reluctant to date on the Web," he wrote. "But if a legally blind, bald, one-legged man can find love online, anyone can."

Mastering E-Romance

For those who find themselves single after decades of marriage, getting started with online dating can seem daunting. Here are some insider tips from veterans of the process:

SELECT SITES CAREFULLY. Before paying up, browse through at least five services and try their free searches, says Alice Solomon, GorgeousGrandma.com's founder. For comparisons, visit DateSeeker.net, DatingSitesReviews.com or eDateReview.com. To begin, first choose one service for a month, then branch out to three to maximize the range of potential matches. Still no good matches? Try starting over with other services.

POST A GREAT PHOTO. Managers of sites such as Match.com and JDate.com say those who post photos get an average of eight times as many contact messages. Services like LookBetterOnline.com can help you improve your online image.

WRITE A UNIQUE PROFILE. "Start with what distinguishes you," says Solomon. Cliches — whether about beaches, fireplaces or passion — won't get daters clicking. And try not to lie about your age, assets or attributes, experts warn. Once you meet in person, the truth will come out anyway. For help crafting a profile, check out ProfileDoctor.com or AARP magazine's online personal-ad maker.

MASTER E-DATING ETIQUETTE. Trish McDermott, Match.com's resident dating expert, says polite e-daters send a gentle no-thank-you note to those who contact them online but are unappealing. And after a date that lacks chemistry, a simple, clear e-mail is the mature way to let a suitor move on to other romantic opportunities. As for those you do like, Solomon suggests avoiding the temptation to build an online relationship without a face-to-face meeting. "You might realize within the first five minutes of a date that you've wasted 10 hours exchanging e-mails," she says.

Here's the full article with illustrations:

<http://www.time.com/time/generations/article/0,9171,1101041018-713197,00.html>