

HIV/AIDS and Older Adults

Based on estimates released by the National Institute on Health persons 50 and older account for between 11 and 15 % of all known AIDS cases. While the number of AIDS cases reported annually among young persons is going down we are now seeing the number for older adults going up.

The number of cases among people who are 50 and older is expected to keep going up as people of all ages live longer due to medications and advances in treatment.

Despite myths and stereotypes about seniors, many of them are sexually active and some are drug users. This puts them at risk to become infected with HIV. Many older people are involved in risky sexual behaviors and do not necessarily have just one partners. This too, places them at risk for HIV and other diseases which can be caught through sex.

This increase in persons 50 years and older has been observed over the past five years. Persons who engage in sex with others of the same sex or with both sexes or use drugs that they inject into their bodies are the primary persons who get HIV. The number of women who are infected by men has also been rising and their numbers increase as women get to be 60 years and older.

Doctors and other persons who provide medical care to older adults often do not realize that they are at the same risk as younger persons. Even older persons themselves do not understand or know this. Also, many doctors and nurses are often afraid or don't know how to talk with older persons about touchy things like sex. Because of this older adults are not tested for HIV as they should be.

Seniors with HIV/AIDS sometimes face double embarrassment or shame, one for their age and the other because they have a disease which they got from either sex or using drugs. Because of this it can be difficult for them, and particularly for women, to talk with or tell their family, friends and community that they have HIV. It is sad but true that seniors are often less likely to find support and comfort among family and friends, and because they are traditionally not comfortable in support groups, they may be less likely to join them. Many seniors with HIV feel that these groups are not made up of people like them.

There are also other special things to consider when it comes to seniors. For older women, after menopause, condom use for birth control becomes unimportant and normal changes in their bodies due to aging such as decrease in vaginal lubrication and thinning vaginal walls can put them at higher risk if they are having sexual intercourse with out protection. Also, HIV symptoms are often like those things that happen to us as we grow older, like feeling tired, losing weight, forgetfulness, skin rashes, and swollen lymph nodes. Because of this doctors fail to recognize HIV symptoms in older persons.

Also, as we get older, we tend to have less energy. This sometimes means we don't go out as much or visit with family and friends as much, and many seniors feel somewhat alone or lonely or even depressed. For seniors with HIV or AIDS, this could make their depression or loneliness feel even greater.

There is still much we do not know about older adults/seniors and we are only beginning to know as the number of people with HIV grows older and larger. Due to the general lack of awareness of HIV/AIDS in older adults, this part of the population has not been a part of research,

clinical trials, educational prevention programs and other efforts to help.

We must provide services and develop messages which reach the population of people over 50 in order that they know their risk and what things are there to help them.

For more information, please contact AIDS Partnership Michigan at 1-800-872-AIDS or at our website: <http://www.aidspartnership.org>.