

Today in the United States there are over a million people living with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Persons over the age of 50 comprise an increasingly large group of those living with HIV/AIDS for two reasons:

- I. Advances in antiretroviral therapy (ART), especially highly active anti retroviral therapy (HAART) is allowing those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS to live longer, healthier lives¹
- II. Persons over the age of 50 are contracting HIV. In fact, in recent years, new AIDS cases rose faster in middle-age and older people than in those under 40². This figure is expected to increase in upcoming years.³

In 2005 Persons Aged 50 and Older accounted for approximately⁴

- 15% of new HIV/AIDS diagnoses
- 24% of persons living with HIV/AIDS (from 17% in 2001)
- 19% of all AIDS diagnoses
- 29% of persons living with AIDS
- 35% of all AIDS deaths

Male to Male unprotected sexual contact with a partner who is HIV-positive is the most common mode of transmission for older men, accounting for 60% of all AIDS infections among older adults. Heterosexual transmission HIV/AIDS among older adults has increased dramatically since the mid 1980s and now accounts for the largest percentage of AIDS cases among any heterosexual group. Furthermore, one recent study found that only 20 percent of sexually active older adults use condoms.⁵

The increased prevalence of new HIV infection among older adults implies that older adults are not protecting themselves from the virus by practicing safer sex and safer injection practices. This is probably due to the fact that they are not educated about their risks and that their sexual and drug-use practices remain largely unaddressed both by health educators and by society at large.

Risk Factors for people over 50 are the same as for other age groups, but some risk factors differ^{4 5}

Sexual Risk Factors

There exists a misconception that older adults no longer engage in sexual activity.

Because of this myth, both older adults and society at large do not consider HIV risks.

Injection Drug Use

As the injection drug using community ages, their HIV risk does not decrease if they continue to share needles

Lack of Knowledge about HIV/AIDS

Very little education and prevention (as well as testing) efforts are directed towards persons over 50 so they may be less knowledgeable about how to protect themselves.

HIV/AIDS at a **Glance**

HIV, Human Immunodeficiency Virus, is the retrovirus that causes AIDS, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. HIV/AIDS impairs the Immune System, making infected individuals more susceptible to infections which a healthy individual could easily fight off.

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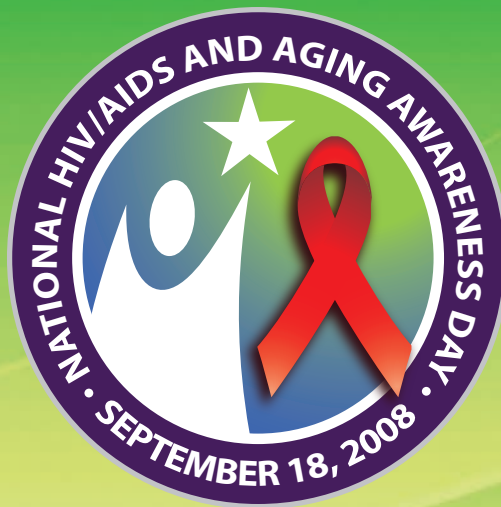
The HIV virus is passed through four bodily fluids: blood, semen, vaginal fluid and breast milk. A person can become infected with HIV through unprotected sex, sharing needles or any other activity in which these fluids are exchanged. HIV is *not* passed through saliva.

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The AIDS Institute



Being of a Minority Race/Ethnicity

Members of minority ethnic groups are at a far greater risk for HIV/AIDS.

Underestimation of Risk by Health Professionals

Most doctors do not ask about or discuss HIV and its risks with their older patients. For this reason, the NIH estimates that there may be many more cases than are reported⁶. Further, the NIA recommends that doctors and other health care professionals provide patients over 50 with information on HIV transmission and at-risk behavior⁷.

Misdiagnosis

Many HIV/AIDS-related illnesses, or Opportunistic Infections, are easily misdiagnosed as aging-related diseases.

The symptoms of HIV

Early on, there are little or no symptoms that the HIV virus is in the body, and it can take anywhere from a few weeks to 10 years for symptoms to appear. Even without symptoms, it is possible to spread HIV or become sick with a HIV-related illness.

Protect Yourself, Get Tested.

One in four Americans who are HIV-positive do not know their status; the only way to know is to get tested. The best way to protect yourself from HIV is to use condoms during any form of sex (oral, vaginal or anal) and not to share needles. It is also important to discuss sexual and drug-use histories with your partners (as well as with your health care provider). There are several types of tests available: blood, urine, and oral. These tests detect either the amount of HIV virus in the body or the number of T-cells in the body. Results of the test can take anywhere from two weeks to 20 minutes. Free and confidential or anonymous HIV tests are available. To find an HIV testing site near you, visit www.hivtest.org.

Works Cited

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2. Center for AIDS Prevention Studies "What are HIV prevention needs of adults over 50?" University of California, San Francisco; September 1997.
3. Hickey, Ann. The 'Graying' of an Epidemic. *American Sociological Association*; Aug, 2006; Montreal; <http://www.allacademic.com>
4. CDC. "Persons Aged 50 and Older" Fact Sheet; Feb. 2008.
5. National Association of Social Workers: "The Aging of HIV"
6. National Institute on Aging. HIV, AIDS and Older People. June, 2004.
7. AIDS Action Council. Policy Facts: Older Americans and HIV. *The Body*; June, 2001.

To become involved in National HIV/AIDS and Aging Awareness Day and activities throughout the year, please contact The AIDS Institute at Aging@theaidsinstitute.org

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