



Prevention issues for Older Adults

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Outline

- Misconceptions about older adults and sex: ageism and stigma
- Older Canadians and HIV: at-risk populations, modes of transmission
- Barriers to HIV screening and diagnosis in older adults
- Strategies for action...

Who is considered an older adult?

The 'American Association of Retired Persons' study found:

- Of adults between 45 and 59, 50% of women and 55% of men reported sexual activity within the previous six months
- Of those between 60 and 74, one-quarter of women and 31% of men reported sexual activity in the same period

Ageism, stigma & assumptions

- Ageism: the prejudice against our feared future self
- Stigma: about sexuality and HIV
- Assumptions about and about older adults concerning sex

How are older people at risk for HIV?

- In the early 1980s, older people who used blood products were at risk for HIV
- Now, risk behaviours for older people are the same as for other populations:
 - Practicing unprotected sex
 - Sharing syringes with others (to a lesser degree)

Older Canadians and HIV

- Older Canadians accounted for approximately 9% of people living with HIV/AIDS in Canada up to 2007
- HIV incidence has increased since 2002 (11% of reported cases) to 15% in 2007
- Sexual contact was the main mode of transmission

(Source: HIV/AIDS in Canada: An environmental scan, CATIE (2009))

Who are older people living with HIV?

- Many are long-term survivors of HIV
- Others have been diagnosed at a later age

The challenge is to reach older people at-risk for HIV with educational programs and messaging, and those who have HIV but have not been diagnosed.

So, why don't they just wear condoms like everyone else?

Older people are less likely to wear a condom because:

- There's no worry about getting pregnant
- Few older adults were educated that condoms should be part of their lives
- They don't consider themselves to be at risk for STIs

Transmission and older women

- After menopause, women's vaginal tissues thin and natural lubrication decreases
- Males have a shorter lifespan than their female counterparts. The higher ratio of women to man may create relations of power.

Transmission risks for older MSM

Older men who have sex with men (MSM) face a unique set of challenges when it comes to HIV prevention:

- They may experience greater stigma about their sexuality
- Loss of partners and friends, condom fatigue and treatment optimism may put them at risk
- Potential for social isolation may lead to drug use and increased risk-taking.

Newly diagnosed older adults

- Studies have found untreated, older HIV-positive persons are twice as likely to die than their younger, untreated counterparts
- However, once HAART is initiated, they respond well to treatment
- It is therefore important to screen and test older adults at-risk for HIV

Barriers to diagnosis

- HIV/AIDS symptoms resemble those of other chronic illnesses which tend to develop in older adults
- Health care providers rarely think to test for HIV in the older adult
- Many medical providers:
 - don't review sexual histories with the older patient
 - don't educate about safer sex practices

HIV stigma among older adults

- The risk of HIV transmission is marked by a lack of knowledge of how HIV is transmitted
- Talking about sex may be considered a social taboo
- Many older adults are reluctant to initiate discussions with their health-care providers about their sexual lives

Strategies for action...

- HIV prevention for seniors can only happen if we bring a coalition of community and service providers together
- It is important to realize the various factors that contribute to HIV in older populations
- Prevention programs and messaging should take these factors into account in developing older age-specific HIV education campaigns

Strategies for action...

- Develop guidelines for testing and assessing risk
- Implement and evaluate models for HIV education for older adults

Thank you!