

Older Women: At Risk for HIV ^[1]

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UNAIDS estimates that 4.2 million older adults (age 50 and over) are living with HIV (HIV+) worldwide; of these, a little over half know that they have the virus. That means that 13 percent of all people living with HIV are older adults. Six out of ten older adults living with HIV live in sub-Saharan Africa.

In the US, HIV began mostly as a disease of young men. Today, however, the epidemic affects both women and men of all ages, including older women. While 45 or 50 may not seem 'old,' it is often the age currently used by organizations that keep track of health-related statistics (e.g., the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC).

While most new HIV infections are still in younger people, women over 50 are getting HIV at an increasing rate. In addition, many people living with HIV are living longer, healthier lives because of the success of newer HIV drugs.

Older Women: An Overlooked Group

Older women are sometimes ignored or overlooked in discussions about HIV prevention and care. It is important that this change, and that older women, their health care providers, and their families understand how the virus can and does impact this group.

- The number of women over 45 living with HIV in the US has been steadily growing in recent years. In 2013, women over 45 represented over half of all women living with HIV (56 percent). In 2014, women accounted for over one third of all newly-diagnosed women in the US (34 percent). It is important to consider that these reported numbers are likely smaller than the real number of women over 45 living with HIV, since many people do not get tested for or diagnosed with HIV even though they may have been living with HIV for several years.
- Despite the myth that older people do not have sex, many older women are sexually active. One study showed that close to three out of four people aged 57 to 64 had had sex in the last year, as had over half of those aged 65 to 74. Older women can actually be at greater risk for HIV infection during sex than younger women because of thinner vaginal walls and dryness that can cause tears in the vaginal area.
- Many women over 50 are thinking about [dating](#) ^[3] and becoming sexually active after the end of a long-term relationship or the death of a partner. Women who have been in monogamous relationships for many years and are now becoming sexually active with new partners may not see themselves as at risk for HIV. They may feel uncomfortable discussing [sexually transmitted infections or diseases \(STIs or STDs\)](#) ^[4] or [safer sex](#) ^[5] with their partners or health care provider, and may not know how to protect themselves.
- Older women may also not be aware of newer options like PrEP to prevent themselves from getting HIV. PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, involves taking HIV drugs before being exposed to HIV to prevent yourself from getting it. For more information, see our fact sheet on [PrEP for Women](#) ^[6].
- Many older women have gone through menopause and therefore do not think about

using condoms for birth control. However, condoms can prevent the spread of STIs or STDs at any age. For more, see our fact sheet, [Talking with Your Partner about Condoms](#) [7].

- Older women living with HIV are more likely to be invisible and isolated, keeping their disease hidden from friends and family. They are afraid to admit they have HIV because of the [stigma](#) [8].
- Due to the lack of awareness of HIV in the older population (women in particular), this age group has been left out of educational prevention programs, research, and [clinical trials](#) [9].
- Many older women [inject drugs](#) [10], and are therefore at risk of getting HIV from sharing [needles and other drug equipment](#) [11].
- Older individuals are not routinely [tested for HIV](#) [12]. This occurs in part because health care providers often feel uncomfortable asking older patients about their sexual behaviors. It also occurs because health care providers, like the general public, are often under the misconception that older women are not sexually active. Therefore, when faced with an older patient with flu-like symptoms, many health care providers do not think to test for HIV. This means that older women are often misdiagnosed and/or not diagnosed with the virus until they have reached a more advanced stage of HIV disease.

What To Do?

There are many things older women can do to prevent the spread of HIV and live healthier in their second half of life.

Understand HIV: Knowledge is Power

First, it is important for older women to have correct information about what HIV is and how it is spread (transmitted) from person to person. To learn more, see fact sheets on [What Are HIV & AIDS?](#) [13] and [HIV Transmission](#) [14]. If you have heard rumors or stories about HIV, check out our [Myths and HIV](#) [15] fact sheet to separate fact from fiction.

See the video "HIV and Aging" from the Administration on Aging from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) by clicking the link below.

Age does **not** protect you from getting or spreading HIV. Practicing safer sex can reduce your risk of getting HIV. So can using clean needles when injecting drugs. For more information, see our fact sheets on [Safer Sex](#) [5] and [Cleaning Equipment for Injecting Drugs](#) [11].

Getting Tested

It is important to prevent older people from acquiring HIV by making sure that they understand the need for routine [HIV testing](#) [12] and early diagnosis. The CDC now recommends that screening for HIV be performed routinely for all patients aged 13 to 64 years in all health-care settings. If you are older than 64, you still need to be tested for HIV if you are sexually active. Additionally, it recommends that all health-care providers encourage patients and their

prospective sex partners to be tested for HIV before initiating a new sexual relationship.

If you have been exposed to HIV, no matter what your age, it is important that you get tested for HIV and talk about post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) with your provider. PEP means taking HIV drugs to prevent HIV after an HIV exposure. PEP needs to be taken within 72 hours of being exposed to HIV and lasts for 28 days.

If you do test positive for HIV, there is no need to give in or give up (please see our fact sheet [Did You Just Test Positive?](#) [16]). With a good attitude and a good HIV drug regimen, you may be able to live with HIV well into old age. HIV is now considered a manageable chronic condition. If you are negative, you can learn what you can do to stay that way. Lastly, knowing your HIV status is an important way to prevent the spread of HIV to others you care about.

Unfortunately, older people are often a forgotten audience for HIV informational programs. We do not usually see the face of an older person or senior citizen on HIV prevention posters. It is important for health care and social service providers to recognize and accept that their aging patients and clients are at risk for HIV. It is also important for providers to ask older patients about their sexual and drug histories.

It is just as important for older women to tell their health care providers about any injection drug use or unsafe sexual experiences, as well as any physical or sexual [violence](#) [17] in their lives. Also mention any other events or situations that you think may have put you at risk for HIV, such as getting a tattoo without being sure that the tattoo artist was using sterile disposable needles. Giving your health care provider accurate information is the best way to protect your health and ensure that you get good medical care, even if it feels awkward or uncomfortable to do so.

Older Women Living with HIV

There are several ways in which living and aging with HIV are different compared to aging without HIV infection. If you are an older woman living with HIV, you may be interested in our fact sheets on [Menopause and HIV](#) [18] and [Aging and HIV](#) [19]. Also be sure to check out our fact sheet on [Caring for Your Heart](#) [20], since heart disease is a leading and often unrecognized cause of illness and death among women worldwide, regardless of their HIV status.

Tags:

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- [older women and HIV](#) [22]
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Additional Resources

Select the links below for additional material related to HIV and older women.

[Older Women and HIV: The Missing Link to Ending the Epidemic \(HelpAge International\)](#) [33]

[HIV and Women Over 50: 'I've Had to Make This Journey Almost Entirely Alone' \(The Guardian\)](#) [34]

[Administration on Aging: HIV/AIDS \(AoA\)](#) [35]

[HIV among Older Americans \(CDC\)](#) [36]

[HIV & Aging \(HIV-Age\)](#) [37]

[HIV & Aging \(SAGE; for LGBT elders\)](#) [38]

[Post-exposure Prophylaxis \(CDC\)](#) [39]

[Safer Sex After 50 \(Ms. Magazine\)](#) [40]

[The Gap Report 2014: People Aged 50 Years and Older \(UNAIDS\)](#) [41]

[Staying Healthy with HIV as You Age \(ACRIA/HIV-Age\)](#) [42]

[HIV: Know the RISKS. Get the Facts. \(AOA Video\)](#) [43]

[HIV, AIDS, and Older People \(National Institute on Aging\)](#) [44]

[HIV/AIDS and Older Adults \(personal video stories; UNC\)](#) [45]

[Newly Diagnosed: Older Adults \(AIDS.gov\)](#) [46]

[People Over 70 Still Have a Lot of Sex, According to Study \(Huffington Post\)](#) [47]

- [Sign Up / Login](#)
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- [HIV Information](#)
- [A Girl Like Me](#)
- [Partners](#)
- [Who We Are](#)
- [Terms](#)
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Source URL: http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/older-women-risk-hiv?qt-activity_tabs=1

Links:

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[3] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/dating-and-hiv>

[4] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/sexually-transmitted-infections-or-diseases-stis-or-stds>

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- [7] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/talking-your-partner-about-condoms>
- [8] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/stigma-and-discrimination-against-women-living-hiv>
- [9] <http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/understanding-clinical-trials>
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- [33] <http://www.helpage.org/blogs/prakash-tyagi-869/older-women-and-hiv-the-missing-link-to-ending-the-epidemic-447/>
- [34] <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/mar/12/hiv-and-women-over-50>
- [35] http://www.aoa.acl.gov/AoA_Programs/HPW/HIV_AIDS/
- [36] <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/risk/age/olderamericans/index.html>
- [37] <http://hiv-age.org/>
- [38] <http://www.sageusa.org/issues/hiv.cfm>
- [39] <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/pep.html>
- [40] <http://msmagazine.com/blog/blog/2011/09/21/safe-sex-after-50/>
- [41] http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/12_Peopleaged50yearsandolder.pdf
- [42] http://hiv-age.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Aging_with_HIV_FinalCorrect.pdf
- [43] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mm_O6Rn1U-M
- [44] <http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/hiv-aids-and-older-people>
- [45] <http://www.med.unc.edu/aging/elderhiv/videos.htm>
- [46] <https://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/just-diagnosed-with-hiv-aids/overview/aging-population/>
- [47] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/28/sex-lives-over-70-active-study_n_6563358.html