

Seniors Are Having Unprotected Sex: & We Don't Mean High School Seniors

Be honest - when you hear the phrase “Seniors Having Sex” your mind immediately jumps to hormone-driven teens. When you realize the conversation is about senior citizens, you gasp with disbelief. You think, they can't really be having sex, can they?

Here are the facts - HIV/AIDS is rapidly spreading among men and women over 50. A lack of awareness about the potential of AIDS in older generations and about effective prevention methods like condoms is leading to an explosion of cases. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently came out with a report that supports routine HIV/AIDS testing for all Americans age 13 to 64, but some experts don't think this is enough.

Advocating Awareness, Dialogue & Routine AIDS Testing for 65+

“Although routine HIV/AIDS testing is a step in the right direction, it is naïve to only test people up to age 64,” says Dr. Dorree Lynn, Washington D.C. psychologist, author, and founder of a website for those in the second half of their life - FiftyAndFurthermore.com. “Whether we like to talk about it or not, sex is still happening among seniors, and where there's sex, there's STD's.”

Maybe it's time to have ‘the talk’ with your parents or grandparents. In an AARP study, only about 5 percent of those 60 and older believe that sex should be left to the young. 85 percent of this age group has some sort of intimate experience once a week, including kissing or intercourse. According to the CDC, the 50+ demographic represents 10



percent of all new AIDS cases and 14 percent of all those who live with the disease nationwide. According to the CDC, an estimated 250,000 people are living with AIDS and don't even know it.

“When discussing a topic like sex, many people fail to include those over sixty,” says Dr. Lynn. “Sex in nursing homes is more common than ever. The perception among seniors is that having unprotected sex doesn't matter. They don't need birth control, so they don't use condoms. Wrong! Assisted living residences, retirement homes and families are in denial. Behind closed doors or curtains, elder couples are in fact ‘doing it.’ I'd like senior facilities to work out plans that allow their residents to have intimacy, including sex, in safe, inviting and protected environments.” Dr. Lynn continues, “Having safe sex as a senior can be very fulfilling – it provides happiness, companionship, pleasure, and statistics indicate sexual activity helps prolong life. I don't want nurses walking in on their residents. I want nurses educating and handing out condoms and informational brochures. I'd like facility managers to implement programs to encourage intimacy among their residents.”

Experts believe HIV infection rates among older Americans are probably even higher than the statistics indicate due to misdiagnosis, under-reporting, and under-testing.

“Many of the symptoms of AIDS are often falsely diagnosed because they mimic the natural aging process,” explains Dr. Lynn. Sometimes it's difficult for physicians to determine if a person has the flu or is infected with the virus. Symptoms of both may include night sweats, chronic fatigue, weight loss, dementia and swollen lymph nodes.

Although HIV transmission routes remain the same regardless of age, certain factors make older people much more vulnerable to infection. Weakened immune systems due to advancing age and sexual risk-taking fueled by use of the popular impotence drug Viagra can facilitate the transmission of HIV and other STDs.

Among post-menopausal women, thinning vaginal walls and a decrease in vaginal lubrication are also contributing factors.

While many younger Americans have been learning about HIV/AIDS since they've been sexually active, older Americans generally know less about these diseases, including how the disease is spread and the importance of prevention. "So many seniors are returning to the dating scene after being divorced or widowed, and many aren't aware of the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases and therefore fail to take the proper precautions," says Dr. Lynn. "Testing and educating seniors of all ages is a MUST. We want them happy, healthy and alive."

One of the struggles for retirement facilities is that the management needs to please the families of their residents. It is the families who hold the purse strings and choose the homes for their parents. Many children of seniors are simply not

supportive, happy, or comfortable with their parents having sex. As a result, facilities often hesitate to initiate programs that encourage intimacy and safe sex among residents, out of fear of offending or upsetting the families.

Realistic Tips for Families & Facilities with Sexually Active Seniors

So what steps should be taken? These tips are not only for Seniors Having Sex, but also to encourage and embrace warmth, intimacy and mutual respect among all seniors and retirement home residents alike.

1. Senior facilities can create special Companion Quiet Rooms with comfortable furnishings and bedding, and even CD players with romantic tunes to set the mood.
2. Set-up senior housing like college dorms where residents can select the age, sex and personality traits of their roommate, or even request a particular resident to share a room with.
3. A little classier than the old "hanging the sock on the doorknob" trick in college. Simple "Do Not Disturb Signs" will encourage private time, and also create a sense of independence in a respectful way. This tip is applicable to both senior facilities and also families who have parents/grandparents cohabitating with them.
4. Provide baskets of condoms, massage oils, lubricating gels, and informational brochures in common areas or restrooms.
5. Offer counselors who can speak with seniors about relationships and sex. Many seniors may feel guilty about sex because of a loved one who passed away, or confusion about how to enter in a new relationship at an older age.

"But this is a pressing issue," insists Dr. Dorree Lynn. "Single senior men are 8 times more likely to be suicidal. Men don't enjoy the same type of community bonding as women do; they have a harder time redefining their social life after they've retired from their jobs. Men's socialization is goal oriented. If as a society, we could encourage men to enjoy intimacy and bonding with partners later on in life, we could literally help to save lives. It's that simple," explains Dr. Lynn. Older white males suffer the highest rates of suicide, not younger people, as is the common misperception. Studies have shown that 70% of older people who commit suicide actually visited their doctor within the month of their death, and many had signs of depression that went undetected during those doctor visits. Dr. Dorree

Lynn believes that educated professionals, family conversations about sex, and the community's active awareness can significantly decrease these current suicide rates.