Older women lack knowledge of HIV, study

BY ALICIA SANDS LURRY

Age is no defense against AIDS. Women aged 50 and older are living longer and remain sexually active, yet many lack appropriate knowledge about HIV transmission and prevention, according to recent findings published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society. The findings are based on a questionnaire that surveyed 514 women aged 50 and older in the general medical clinics at Grady Hospital.

Out of nine questions assessing the women’s knowledge of HIV sexual transmission risks, the mean score was 3.7, and no respondent correctly answered all nine questions. This poor performance suggests that active measures must be taken to increase older women’s knowledge of HIV prevention as their younger counterparts. The authors indicated that in the National Health Interview Study (NHIS), people 50 and older scored lower on knowledge questions about HIV/AIDS than younger adults. The most pronounced deficits involved the efficacy of condoms in preventing HIV transmission.

“The important thing to realize is that these patients are still sexually active,” Bernstein said. “The problem is they don’t realize that they’re at risk for this life-threatening disease. By trying to improve their knowledge and impart the fact that physicians have a tremendous role to play in educating patients—even those who are older than we normally think to be at risk—we can really make great strides to protect them against this disease.”
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Participants also identified all sources from which they received HIV information. Eighty-five percent of those surveyed indicated they received their information from television; another 54 percent said they learned about HIV from friends; and 51 percent identified newspapers as a

question about HIV: “The misconception is that older people don’t have sex anymore, and that they really are not engaging in risky activity,” Bernstein said. “(Concerning) older women being at risk for HIV, much of that risk is based on how much they know about HIV. Unfortunately this population has not been targeted with HIV prevention messages because they aren’t considered to be at risk. Yet their risk is rooted partially in their low knowledge.”

According to the article, 10 percent of AIDS cases in U.S. adult women have occurred in those 50 and older, the majority of these resulting from sexual transmission. The article also notes that 32 percent of these women were 60 or older at diagnosis, suggesting their infections occurred in the postmenopausal years.

Older adults, the article continues, do not know as much about HIV transmission and

Grady's Lisa Bernstein is principal investigator of a study that involved older women’s knowledge of HIV and AIDS risks. As people age, they are increasingly staying sexually active later in life, and a lack of knowledge of HIV transmission factors increases their risk of infection.

The majority of women (65 percent) scored poorly, answering four or fewer questions correctly. Eighty-four percent of women correctly identified unprotected heterosexual sex as a moderate-to-high-risk activity; 63 percent of women incorrectly identified kissing as a mode of transmission; 74 percent underestimated oral sex as a moderate-to-high-risk activity; 20 percent identified only 13 percent identified condoms as effective in preventing HIV, while 18 percent said they were not effective at all. For four percent of the women, abstinence was not at all or somewhat effective.

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