5 Tips for Seniors Who Discover They Have HIV

17% of new diagnoses are among those 50 and older. Here's some needed advice for this population.

July 19, 2019 By Aundaray Guess

Learning that you have HIV is difficult to process. So many questions might go through your head regarding what you should do next. You might even ask yourself, Will I die? No matter your age, you're likely to show these concerns.

Numerous resources and informational guides can help people through this process, but in general they don't speak to the unique audience of those over 60.

This is alarming because, according to the CDC in 2016, an estimated 47% of Americans living with HIV are 50 and older. What's more, 17% of new diagnosis were among people 50 and older (this translates to 6,812 out of the 39,782 total diagnoses that year). There are various reasons for new diagnoses among seniors.One is that HIV prevention campaigns and tools such as Truvada as PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis, a daily pill) are marketed to a younger audience. This means that older adults are often not provided information on the benefits of PrEP along with how to gain access to it.

A huge reason for this is that the general public is in denial that adults over 60 are having sex, when in fact even those in their 80s are still sexually active. Another factor is that primary doctors fail their older adult patients by not asking about their sexual lives and providing needed prevention information or tools that would decrease their risk of being exposed to a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

As someone in my 50s and living with HIV, I feel there's a huge difference between learning you have HIV while in your senior years and finding that out while you're younger. Mentally, younger people may have a different outlook and feel they still have a life ahead of them despite their newly learned HIV status. Older adults may feel that what time they have left has now been cut short. And physically, HIV is known for increasing the aging process, so this has a greater impact on seniors who often have comorbidity diagnoses, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, and other illnesses that come with aging.

Recognizing there is little to no information on how to accept you have HIV as a senior, I would like to provide what I consider 5 pieces of advice.

Seek an HIV specialist.

The last thing someone who sees numerous doctors wants to do is to add another to the roster. Yet despite how knowledgeable your primary physician is, the fact is that you'll also need a primary HIV doctor. This doctor will know all the latest news and treatments that are available to you as he or she works with you to help keep the virus suppressed. Remember, someone who specializes in geriatric issues may not be as knowledgeable about your specific HIV needs.

Have your doctors talk to each other.

If you're seeing a primary and have now added an HIV specialist, you'll realize the importance of them working together to manage your care. It's important that each one knows what the other is doing and prescribing. This is especially important because some HIV medications may not work well with your other drugs.

Consider HIV treatment.

Speaking of medication, you might hesitate at first to start HIV treatment. Maybe you don't want to add more pills to your current regimen, or perhaps you worry about how they'll make you feel. Yes, each person is different when it comes to side effects, but luckily, thanks to the advances of recent years, most people with HIV take fewer pills and experience fewer side effects. In fact, one or two pills a day is now the new norm. The main takeaway is that no matter your age, you want to keep the virus suppressed and undetectable.

Isolation will kill you faster than HIV.

One issue seniors face no matter their HIV status is dealing with isolation. A young person may have an easier time finding a support system, but the reality is that as we age, that becomes a harder task. Especially for LGBT elders who have may not have children or may still be ostracized from family based on their sexuality. With the addition of HIV, it may become more difficult for seniors to find connections. This topic alone will be covered in-depth in my next posting as isolation will kill you faster than any disease. But a quick overview: Researchers found that a lonely person's immune system responds differently to fighting viruses, making isolated people more likely to develop an illness. Also, isolation often leads to depression, which can affect medication adherence. My advice for seniors, especially those living with HIV, is to strongly consider exploring ways to meet new people so you don't feel alone. Just a few ideas include: senior centers, cultural events, volunteerism, and community gatherings—note that in many of those examples you don't have to share your HIV news with others. The main goal should be to make sure you're not living your life in a bubble, as you'll need support.

If possible, find an older adult HIV support group.

This may not be as easy as it sounds, especially for those in rural areas. You can join an HIV group open to all, but you'll quickly realize that these groups don't often cater to older adults,

and this could make you feel disconnected from the younger members and their issues. This is not to say you shouldn't join those HIV support groups but just to make you aware that you may feel such groups don't speak to your needs as an older adult. In some cases, these groups are run by those with an understanding of the needs of older adults, but these are few and far in-between. If left with no choice, joining any group that offers support is better than choosing to have no support.

And I know I said five but I will sneak in a last piece of advice. That is to not feel your life is over. You may experience a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, especially if you're already exhausted from dealing with other pre-existing conditions or if you expected the senior years of your life to be about enjoying the time you've earned and not dealing with a disease like HIV.

To that, I say find those moments in life that makes it all worth it. Embrace the people who make it worth it. Discover the reasoning to keep fighting, to keep going and most importantly to keep living. Your story is not over yet. This is just another chapter. Today, HIV is a manageable disease and not the death sentence it used to be. So there's no need to feel your life is over.

I would love for others to share their advice and opinions to seniors learning they now have HIV.

Share so we can let others know there is hope!

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/5-ways-accept-new-hiv-status-senior