Still Here! Advocating for Senior HIV Health

The last of a three-part series offers five ways seniors can advocate for their HIV health.

June 1, 2017 By Aundaray Guess

In my last two posts, I looked at the response from medical professionals, non-profit and senior organization as it relates to aging and HIV, with the goal of raising awareness. Each post was meant to highlight the importance of seniors knowing their status and including them in safe sex conversations. From the beginning, it was my goal to recognize that HIV doesn't discriminate based on gender, sexual identity and, most important, age. Knowing that seniors are not being fully addressed or provided information, how can they advocate for themselves, especially when it comes to their HIV health or prevention?

Older adults, in some cases, will have to be their own spokesperson and demand that certain industries recognize the value in talking to them about HIV. They should be prepared to ask, with the recent rise of infections happening in older adults, why are they being ignored. When it comes to policies and statements, where are the elder inclusion? When it comes to the images depicting HIV prevention methods; are those images of people living over 50 and if not, why not? And if senior centers are for seniors and work to promote a full life, isn't sex part of that life. So why are there no discussions within the center itself? There are other questions, but asking them may be fruitless as answers may not be forthcoming. Therefore, it may fall onto seniors to push for answers.

With all this in mind, there are some ways seniors can advocate for themselves as it relates to HIV and your prevention.

1. Don't ask your doctor if you need an HIV test. Tell your doctor you want an HIV test.
   Your doctor should always have your whole health in mind. And unfortunately, they may not. When it comes to having an HIV test, you should be prepared to ask for a test. If it gets to the point you're demanding one because of the hesitancy of your doctor. To me, that would be good enough reason to reconsider the relationship you have with your doctor.
2. Push senior centers to offer sex discussions.
   Various community-based centers that provide programs for seniors should also offer discussions on sex. This can range from learning about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and, for women, about properly washing your sex toys and/or providing a safe space for general discussions concerning sex. Speak to the director of a center and ask how such activities can be programmed onto the schedule. If the director is not receptive, rally senior members of the organization who

share the same viewpoints and make the request as a unified group.

3. Request that senior centers offer free and available condoms.
   If your senior center is not offering free condoms, which can be easily obtained, asked the person in charge, why not? Especially for long-term senior centers, there should be a placement of condoms for the residents. If centers claim to not know where to obtain condoms or it's not in their budget, let them know that most state health departments will provide them free.

4. Ask your local HIV non-profit organization how elders fit into their mission.
   Most HIV non-profits try to lump all their clients into one mission and category, but they're doing a disservice to elders as that group has different concerns and needs. If you frequent a known organization and see little to no visibility of older adult mentions, ask to speak to the executive director and request the agency start to examine the needs of seniors. Although most are addressing the needs by creating inter-generational spaces/events, discuss the need for older adults to also have their own space attached to a mission of providing support as well.

5. Learn how to advocate for your own sexual health.
   Do you know how to talk to your sex partner about HIV? This may be hard for some to do. Especially for seniors who struggle with isolation. There's a notion that a prospective sex partner may reject you based on talking about HIV or questioning their status. And from that fear of isolation, seniors may ignore this talk. This is not just for those who are single but also includes those in a committed relationship. Realizing that it takes two to be monogamous, you want to make sure your partner is honoring that part of your relationship.

   As difficult as this talk may be, simply approach it as a check in if you're in a committed relationship. And emphasize that it's not a matter of distrust but of wanting to know more about your partner.

   If it's a one nighter or fling, this conversation can be more direct. Asking anyone of their sexual history before having sex is something everyone should do. After all, you're about to be intimate with someone and at the most you want to know more about them.

   If someone rejects you because you want to initiate this conversation, they may be doing you a favor as any reasonable person wouldn't mind sharing. But the simple fact is that some exposures to HIV come from people who think their partner is being monogamous.

This is not a definite list, but consider it a beginning. It should also be considered a continuation of discussions that should be taking place.

Seniors are still here. And while they are here, we have to remove the lens of invisibility we've placed on them and recognize they have as much of a risk of getting HIV as someone in their 20s and 30s.

And by adding elders to the table, we not only state that their voice matter, we also communicate that their lives matter.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/still-advocating-senior-hiv-health