Age Doesn’t Protect Against HIV

Older women can also benefit from PrEP.

March 2, 2020 By Kate Ferguson

No matter her age, as long as a woman is sexually active she risks acquiring HIV. This simple fact of life is one that community women’s organization Older Women Embracing Life (OWEL), in Baltimore, has been stressing since the group launched in support of HIV-positive women—especially those over 50—as well as women who may be at risk for the virus.

“We want to prevent others from hearing the diagnosis that tells them you’re HIV positive, so we do a lot of prevention work, which includes treatment as prevention and support with adherence as prevention,” explains Melanie Reese, OWEL’s executive director. “Over the years, new tools and skills evolved that we’ve incorporated into our skill set to help women, especially seniors, who don’t feel they’re at risk and who medical providers don’t see as being at risk.”

In 2017, the University of Michigan used a national sample to conduct a countrywide poll on healthy aging. Results showed that 40% of adults, ages 65 to 80, said they were sexually active. While two in three respondents to the survey said they would talk with their care provider if they experienced a sexual health problem, 83% had not spoken with a doctor about their sexual health in the past two years.

Additionally, findings show that older people are less likely to initiate a talk about safe sex practices or be asked by a health care provider about their sexual health, take PrEP for prevention, use a condom, get tested for HIV or discuss condom use with their sexual partners.

Women’s HIV prevention experts suggest that an effective way to implement PrEP among older female adults is through activities and interventions that increase their knowledge about HIV.

“It is also important to use language that conveys a positive tone and to discuss the risk of acquiring an HIV infection across a woman’s life span,” say researchers who follow this issue.

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