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Safer Sexual Behaviors Among Seniors

Why the term **safer sex** instead of **safe sex**? Frankly, no matter how many precautions someone takes, there really exists no truly safe sexual activity, so the term “safer sex” is the most honest way to label sexual activity.

To discuss this matter with a senior, here are some basic facts about sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

1. **Sexually transmitted infections are increasing rapidly among those over the age of 55.** In fact, some type of infections have double or even tripled in numbers in less than ten years. About a third of all people living with HIV/AIDS is over the age of 50 and many of these people are unaware that they are even infected.
2. **Condoms are highly effective in preventing in preventing the spread of STIs.** It is also important that seniors use lubricants as well since age tends to limit natural lubrication. With appropriate lubrication, the condom could tear. Also, use latex condoms, which are more effective. Condoms made of sheepskin has pores through which some bacteria can penetrate.
3. **“Clean” and “Healthy Looking” people can still spread STIs and HIV.** Cleanliness does not equal being STI free. Lots of people carry STIs without symptoms. Remember, when you have sex with someone, you are also having sex with everyone they had sex with as well.
4. **Ask your doctor for a STI test and a HCV test.** Even with the increased sexual activity among seniors, many medical professionals still do not test for STIs unless requested. If you are sexually active, especially with multiple partners, this should be a regular routine.
5. **There is treatment for all STIs and many can be cured.** Some STIs like HIV, Hepatitis B, HPV, Herpes and genital warts cannot be cured, there are treatments that make them manageable. There is a vaccine for HPV, Hepatitis B and the sometimes sexually transmitted Hepatitis C can be cured using certain medications. The sooner the diagnosis, the quicker treatment can begin.
6. **Getting tested is easier.** There are more and more places seniors can get tested. In fact, Medicare will pay for testing and medications can be provided in most cases with a low co-pay.

Discussion Points

What discussions should a family member or someone working with a senior have regarding sexual activity? Here are some suggestions:

1. **Don't be afraid** to approach the subject of sexual behaviors among the senior population.
2. **Correct misconceptions** seniors may have about sexual activity and behaviors.
3. **Teach** seniors about physical changes that may affect sexual functioning.
4. **Educate** them on safer sex, STIs and HIV, and what the consequences may be from unprotected sex.

For further information on this matter, go to the Centers for Disease Control website.