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## A WAKE-UP CALL ON SAFE SEX

By **JANE P. FOWLER**

After giving hundreds of public speeches and scores of media interviews over about a dozen years, I still wonder whether anyone is listening to my pleas for HIV prevention programs for older adults. I am continually amazed by the response of the general population, even healthcare and social service providers: “Old people at risk? But this is a sexually transmitted disease.”

Wake up, everybody! Statistics show that, yes, aging individuals remain sexual beings into their 60s and 70s, perhaps longer. Midlife and older people can be at the same risk for HIV infection as their younger counterparts, especially if they aren’t educated about transmission and prevention of sexually transmitted disease (STD).

I often tell the tale of my encounter in a hospital pre-op room, where I was awaiting minor surgery some years ago, with a young anesthesiologist who was questioning me about drug allergies. Suddenly, he asked, “How do you respond to blood transfusions?” Confused, I answered, “I don’t know, I’ve never had one.” “But you have HIV,” he countered.

“Well, this old lady got HIV through sex,” I corrected him. “So, there.”

Indeed, my HIV infection, at age 50 (two years after my 24-year marriage ended in divorce in 1983), came through unprotected heterosexual contact with a man who had been a good friend my entire adult life. Now, I remind everyone, “You never know the sexual history of anybody but yourself. Take precautions.”

### PUTTING A NEW FACE ON HIV/AIDS

It was to put an old, wrinkled, female face on the HIV/AIDS epidemic that I began to speak out in 1995, telling my story as proof that anyone can contract this virus—not because of who you are, or even how old you are, but because of what you do or don’t do in regard to preventing transmission.

Those of us aging with HIV face a double stigma: that of having an infection transmitted sexually or through drug use and that of being old. After all, common thinking is that Grandma or Grandpa should not have been out there screwing or shooting up. Because of stigma, many in the older community live in isolation, fearful even to admit to family members the fact of their disease.

My awareness campaign has not always been easy, especially when educational programs are not well attended (again, because of denial that elders need this information), but I persevere with the hope that I can counteract some of the ignorance surrounding this issue. My 30 years as a journalist—first with a weekly byline in *The Kansas City Star*, then a monthly one in *Bon Appétit* magazine—were heady for me, but I think now I’m making a much more important contribution.

I know that as boomers move into their elder years, some will do so alone after having had long-term relationships, and they may be eager for new experiences. Press reports say that single older adults are among the fastest-growing segment of the dating services industry, and I worry that too many older people, especially women, don’t know what’s out there today.

So, I urge everyone who is not in a mutually monogamous relationship, in which neither person is STD-infected, to practice safer sex. To older women, I stress, “If a partner won’t use protection, find another partner.” And to older men who may be using meds to correct erectile dysfunction, I say, “If you can now get it up, cover it up.” ❖

*Jane P. Fowler is founder and director of HIV Wisdom for Older Women. To learn more, visit the website at [www.hivwisdom.org](http://www.hivwisdom.org).*