

HIV/AIDS Myths & Realities

One out of five people living with HIV/AIDS in the United States is unaware of his/her status. If you are from a diverse community, that chance of being infected increases substantially, especially among aging populations.

In 2009, people ages 50 and older represented 23% of AIDS diagnoses in the United States.¹ In the Latino community, the rates of HIV/AIDS among people ages 50 and over were five times higher among Hispanics compared to non-Hispanic Whites.² Yet, older Americans are often overlooked in conversations surrounding HIV/AIDS. As the XIX International AIDS Conference is celebrated in Washington, DC, one way we can all act against AIDS is to address the common myths surrounding HIV/AIDS.

Myth: HIV is a contagious disease, like a flu or common cold.

Reality: HIV is not transmitted through saliva, sneezes, or sweat. Casual contact (shaking hands, sharing utensils, or kissing) doesn't transmit the virus either.

Myth: People living with HIV don't look healthy.

Reality: People living with HIV (PLWH) look no different from any other person for several years after being infected with the virus, and may continue infecting others. If it is not treated after 8 to 10 years, then they will develop AIDS, which is a deadly complication of HIV. On the other hand, PLWH who get treated can have a good quality of life and never come to develop AIDS.

Myth: Older adults are immune to HIV.

Reality: Anyone can get infected with HIV at any point in their lives. In fact, almost 25% of the people living with HIV/AIDS are 50 years or older.

Myth: Once you are infected with HIV, you will get AIDS right away.

Reality: Those who get tested early, start getting treated upon learning their HIV-positive status, and stick to the treatment, can potentially live the rest of their lives without developing AIDS. Once infected it may take 8 to 10 years to develop AIDS, a deadly complication of HIV.

Myth: There is no point in getting treated for HIV, I will die anyways.

Reality: PLWH who are under treatment can keep their virus (load) count very low, and live their lives with HIV as a chronic disease. In addition, there is evidence that people whose HIV is well controlled with anti-viral medications are also less likely to transmit HIV to others. Therefore, treatment is also a way to prevent the spread of HIV.

NHCOA is one of three national Hispanic/Latino partners of the CDC's Act Against AIDS Leadership Initiative (AAALI), a national effort to inform Hispanic older adults, their families, and caregivers about HIV/AIDS as well as encourage them to talk HIV in their communities and with their loved ones. To learn how to act against HIV/AIDS, please visit www.actagainstaids.org or www.nhcoa.org.

¹ AoA. Gov. HIV: Know the RISKS. Get the FACTS. Older Adults and HIV/AIDS Toolkit.

² National Institute on Aging (NIA). HIV, AIDS, and Older Adults.