

# SENIOR RESOURCES GUIDE



## Staying Safe From Sexually Transmitted Diseases

**Washington Jewish Week**



**Jewish Council for the Aging**  
*Helping All Seniors Thrive\**





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# Sexually Transmitted Diseases

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**S**exually transmitted infections are on the rise in the United States. Older Americans are becoming infected in numbers higher than ever before.

In 2000, the Centers for Disease Control reported fewer than 100 cases of primary and secondary syphilis among people 65 years and older. By 2020, the number of cases in that age group had jumped to nearly 600.

In 2022, that number surpassed 1,000.

Likewise, the number of gonorrhea cases jumped dramatically. In 2000, the CDC reported 1,000 cases among people 65 years and older. In 2022 the number had more than tripled, to 3,433 cases.

And the numbers also increased among those 65 years and older concerning chlamydia. In 2000,

there were 1,000 cases reported by the CDC. Just 22 years later, that number jumped to 3,572 cases.

The real increases are certainly higher as not everyone with a sexually transmitted infection knows they have it or is ever tested for it.

This Senior Resources Guide, which is written by the Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington, is designed to be informative, not alarmist. It will discuss the definitions of these sexually transmitted infections, why the number of cases is rising and what people can do to keep themselves healthy and safe.

Many historical figures are alleged to have syphilis or other sexually transmitted infections, including Christopher Columbus, Benito Mussolini, Ivan the Terrible and even gangster Al Capone.

According to the World Health Organization, syphilis is a preventable and curable bacterial sexually transmitted infection that can cause serious health problems if not treated. People can, and often

do, have syphilis without symptoms or unrecognized symptoms.

It is transmitted during oral, vaginal and anal sex and through blood transfusion.

Primary syphilis, the first stage, usually lasts around three weeks and often includes a round, painless, usually hard sore on the genitals or anus. Often the sore — or chancre — isn't noticed and heals in fewer than 10 days, according to WHO.

If untreated, syphilis then enters a secondary stage that includes a non-itchy rash, often on one's palms and soles of feet. White or gray lesions will appear in warm, moist areas, including the labia, anus or the site where the chancre was.

These symptoms will disappear even without treatment, but if not treated for years, the disease enters a latent stage that can lead to brain and cardiovascular diseases, according to WHO.

Gonorrhea also is a preventable and curable sexually transmitted infection. It is caused by the



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bacterium *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*, which is primarily transmitted through vaginal, oral and anal sex.

Most people with gonorrhea do not have symptoms, but if they do, it usually comes in the form of vaginal or penile discharge. If left untreated, this disease can lead to infertility and other sexual health complications. It also can increase the risk of HIV infection, according to WHO.

Women are more likely to not experience symptoms but may have vaginal discharge, pain or burning while urinating or vaginal bleeding. Men may experience a white, yellow or greenish discharge from the penis, pain or burning sensation while urinating or painful or swollen testes.

If infected anally, both sexes may experience discharge, bleeding, itchiness, soreness or painful bowel movements, according to the WHO. If infected through the throat, people usually do not experience symptoms but may have redness, pain and a sore throat.

Untreated infections can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease in women. Men may experience scrotal swelling or urethra stricture.

Chlamydia is a common sexually transmitted infection that occurs in both men and women. It is caused by a bacterium called *Chlamydia trachomatis*. Chlamydia also is a preventable and curable sexually transmitted infection primarily transmitted through vaginal, oral and anal sex.

Many people with chlamydia have no symptoms or only mild symptoms. Symptoms, if they occur, may not appear for up to three weeks after having sex with someone who has chlamydia.

For women, those symptoms include a change in vaginal discharge, bleeding between menstrual periods or after sex, pain or discomfort in the lower abdomen and a burning sensation when urinating. For men, symptoms include burning when urinating, penile discharge and pain or discomfort in the testicles.

If transmitted anally, symptoms for both men and women include burning while urinating, discharge and bleeding.

Chlamydia can cause serious problems if left untreated, particularly among women. Men may develop a painful infection in their testicles. Chlamydia may cause swollen joints (arthritis) and inflammation of the eyes.

According to a web post from NEWS Medical Life Sciences, sexually active older adults often are more susceptible to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections than younger people due to various health conditions, including a weakened immune system.

All three of these infections can also cause stigma and affect personal relationships.

Intimacy and sexuality are important throughout one's life. The information in this guide is not intended to scare people away from physically

expressing their feelings and desires as they age. In fact, quite the opposite.

According to the National Institute on Aging, some adults strive for both a sexual and intimate relationship regardless of their age. Other adults are content with one or the other or prefer close connections. Enjoying what works best for you is important.

According to the Mayo Clinic, adults can keep having sex at any age. Many older adults can and do enjoy an active sex life.

However, the importance of protection sometimes gets lost as we age. Condoms are often connected with preventing pregnancies, but they also are an excellent way of stopping sexually transmitted infections from spreading.

These infections usually spread through having unprotected sexual contact with someone who is infected. You can't tell if your partner is infected, and people may not even know they are if they are asymptomatic. Also, someone may be too embarrassed to admit it. So it is important not to assume one way or the other.

That is why it is smart to be overly cautious when becoming intimate with someone new or someone you don't know very well.

Barrier methods of birth control such as condoms and dental dams for oral sex help lower the risk of getting most sexually transmitted infections. It also



helps to have just one sex partner who only has sex with you.

There are numerous reasons why sexually transmitted infections among senior adults are on the rise.

“Older Americans get lulled into a false sense of low risk,” said Dr. Sten Vermund, dean of the Yale School of Public Health and co-author of a 2021 report for the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.

“They think, I’m a grandfather or grandmother — how can I be at risk of a sexually transmitted infection?” But if you are having sex with a new partner or outside of a monogamous relationship, you are at risk, he wrote on the AARP website.

According to Dr. Angelina Gangesta, University Hospitals’ division chief of obstetrics and gynecology, her hospital system in Ohio is “definitely seeing a rise in infections in the older population, particularly in people over 65.”

More people are moving into assisted living facilities while still active. They may pair up with a fellow resident and engage in sex without a lot of forethought. Also, they probably don’t see themselves as possible victims of sexually transmitted infections as they often never had sex education classes when

they were younger.

Thanks to modern medicine, people who thought they were no longer sexually active can enjoy sexual intimacy. Men suffering from erectile dysfunction can take drugs, and women are now on hormone therapy. Therefore, they can remain sexually active.

“When you put all that together, you see a population where there’s probably a little more risky behavior going on, and where people are having new partners because a spouse died or they divorced,” Gangestad wrote.

“Older people aren’t thinking about it. Providers aren’t thinking about it either. We’re not doing the education we should be doing with the older population,” she noted.

Living longer and a high rate of divorce also can result in older adults becoming infected, when new and multiple partners are thrown into the mix. In some foreign countries, the infection rate is higher than in the United States, and a traveler meeting someone on vacation may not realize their partner is infected.

Medical professionals are much more likely to speak with young people about protective methods than their older patients. They also are more likely to advise young people to get tested for sexually

transmitted infections when they should be speaking to people of all ages.

That goes for the patient as well. Sometimes, older adults are reluctant to bring up their sex life to a doctor, especially when it is going so well. But that also can be true if they are experiencing problems.

Communication between both medical professionals and their patients could reduce the risks of becoming infected. Protection is not the first or even second thing most people think of when having a new sex partner after several decades of monogamy.

“People are just living longer and having sex for longer than they used to,” said Dr. Shannon Dowler, a family physician in North Carolina and the author of “Never Too Late: Your Guide to Safer Sex After 60” in an article in The New York Times.

But doctors who see older patients for routine checkups often fail to counsel them about their sex lives or offer routine screening, said Dr. Mariah Robertson, a geriatric medicine specialist with Johns Hopkins University, who also was quoted in the Times article.

Robertson said the uptick in sexually transmitted infections arises partly from “pervasive ageism in health care” and a society that makes the mistaken

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assumption that older adults simply don't have much sex.

"In an ideal world, I'd wave a wand and every primary health care provider would ask their older adult patients about sexual activity during their annual wellness visit, or even more frequently than that," she said.

When seeing older patients, doctors tend to focus on heart disease, diabetes and other chronic illnesses. Having a frank talk about sex often isn't even on their radar, yet it is forefront in the minds of medical professionals whose patients are young adults.

When speaking with older adults, doctors are urged to be specific. Rather than just recommending condom use, medical professionals should speak about specific types and the differences as it may all be new to their patients, or at least something they have not thought about in a long time. Also, there are so many choices these days, it could be overwhelming.

But if you do test positive for a sexually transmitted infection, treatment often is as simple as swallowing antibiotics.

These infections are treatable, but the immune system weakens with age, which makes it more difficult. "Previous infections that hadn't flared up in decades might suddenly reappear," Dowler said. "You see that in herpes infections particularly."

According to the Mayo Clinic, sexually transmitted infections caused by bacteria generally are easier to treat. Those caused by viruses can be treated and managed but not always cured.

Antibiotics can cure many sexually transmitted infections, according to the Mayo Clinic. It is important to take the entire prescription given by a medical professional. It also is important to refrain from sexual activity for about a week after you have completed the antibiotics and any sores have healed.

People diagnosed with chlamydia should be retested three months after treatment, because there's a high chance of reinfection, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Those diagnosed with herpes or HIV need to take antiviral medicine, which could include daily suppressive therapy with an antiviral medication.

Health professionals recommend getting retested to ensure that the treatment worked and that you haven't been reinfected.

Dr. Leana Wen, who previously served as Baltimore's Health Commission, is a professor of health policy and management at George Washington University. She writes a twice-a-week column on medicine and public health for The Washington Post.

Recently, she stressed the importance of dealing with the increases in sexually transmitted infections in older adults, which she called an "alarming trend."

According to Wen, there are six underlying factors



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contributing to the sharp rise.

A lack of knowledge about sexually transmitted infections is a problem, she wrote.

According to a study by researchers at Texas A&M's School of Public Health that she cited, when people ranging in age between 65 and 94 were asked basic questions about this issue, "Many gave incorrect answers. For instance, only half knew there was a cure for chlamydia, and nearly two-thirds said a woman can tell if she has gonorrhea by looking at her body."

Another factor is the low rate of condom use among this population. In a study by AARP that Wen cited, only 8% of older adults who were sexually active during the past month of the study reported using condoms. In other studies, the rate is even lower, she wrote.

Because older people are healthier and staying sexually active longer, it is only natural for the rate of infections to rise. Wen pointed to medications for erectile dysfunction and hormonal therapies to alleviate vaginal dryness as reasons why people are enjoying sex later in life than they used to.

Yet another factor Wen noted is that there are more opportunities for new sex partners, especially when living in senior communities.

Because women have a longer life expectancy — almost six years longer than men — a "partner gap" has arisen. Therefore, older men may find themselves with multiple female sex partners, and these men often are not likely to be using condoms. Therefore, one male could be spreading an infection

to multiple women without even knowing it, according to Wen.

Finally, she wrote that many older adults are hesitant to speak with a new partner about their sexual history or even whether or not they have been tested for sexually transmitted infections. The subject often is considered taboo when it really should not be.

When beginning a sexual relationship, safe sex is important at any age. Don't hesitate to ask a partner about their sexual background and whether they have had any sexually transmitted infections or have been tested. Ask if they inject illegal drugs or whether they have vaginal or penile sores, discharges or odors.

Sure, the discussion will be painful but far less uncomfortable than becoming infected when it could have been easily avoided.

According to Planned Parenthood, testing for a sexually transmitted infection is not part of a regular checkup or gynecological exam. It must be requested. Don't be embarrassed. Chances are, you are not the first person who asked that doctor about the need to be tested. It's the responsible thing to do.

If you are concerned about speaking about sex with a doctor you have gone to for years, go to a Planned Parenthood center for testing.

Tell the medical professional about any possible symptoms, your sexual history, the number of people you've had sex with and the kind of sex you have, including vaginal, anal or oral. Let the doctor or nurse know if you use condoms or share needles. The more open and honest you are, the better a health-care



professional will be at ordering the correct tests. Testing actually is quick and not painful. However, there is not one single test for all sexually transmitted infections. Each has its own test.

Often the test involves a urine sample and blood work. An oral test involves rubbing the inside of the mouth or throat with a swab. The doctor may perform a physical exam to examine the genital area to look for warts, sores, rashes, irritation or discharge.

If sores or blisters are found, the doctor probably will take a fluid sample with a swab, according to Planned Parenthood. The doctor or nurse also may use a genital swab to gather any discharge or cell samples.

More than likely, your health care professional will let you know during that visit if you tested positive and do have a sexually transmitted infection. But some tests may take a few days if the samples are sent away to a lab.

Depending on health coverage, which tests are conducted and the patient's income, testing can be free or cost up to about \$250, according to Planned Parenthood. Testing is often free or not too expensive if the patient has health insurance.

It is not enough for you alone to get tested. Before having sex with a new partner, both people should be tested. Sure, it may be difficult to have this kind of discussion so early in what may not even be a serious relationship, but the consequences of not broaching the subject could be major.

Remember, no one is cross-examining

you about cheating or learning your deep, dark, secret background. It's just a matter of staying healthy and safe. You may even be surprised when the other person is relieved and was wondering how to talk to you.

Planned Parenthood suggested a few ways to start the conversation:

- This is hard for me to talk about, but I care about you and I think it's important. How do you feel about going to get tested together?
- For your information, I got tested last month, and I didn't have anything. Have you ever been tested? I want us to make sure we're taking care of each other.
- I think it's important to be honest, so I want to tell you that I got tested last month and found out I had chlamydia. I took medicine, and I don't have it anymore. But it showed me how common and sneaky sexually transmitted infections are. Have you ever been tested?

If one person in a relationship tests positive, obviously the other partner needs to know. This is not a time to panic or go quiet. Remember, following a doctor's directions for treatment should result in a cure.

According to Planned Parenthood, people with sexually transmitted infections can be in relationships, have sex and go on with their lives.

If it turns out one or both partners tested positive, it can be traumatic. You may feel angry, scared, betrayed and ashamed and consider ending your sexual life forever.

According to the Mayo Clinic, it's best to hold off placing blame. It's not

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fair to assume that your partner has been unfaithful to you. One or both of you may have become infected by a previous partner. Remember, it's possible to be both infected and asymptomatic.

It is important to be honest and upfront with your doctors and nurses. They aren't there to judge. Rather, they are there to provide treatment. It is part of their job to keep what you tell them in confidence.

If diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection, it is vital to let any recent partners know of your condition. Otherwise, they may end up spreading the infection to others.

Many older couples find greater satisfaction in their sex lives than they did when they were younger, according to the National Institutes of Health. "They may have fewer distractions, more time and privacy, and no worries about getting pregnant. They also may be better able to express what they want and need, which can offer an opportunity for greater intimacy and connection."

Just because you don't know anyone you would like to become intimate with doesn't mean the end of your sex life. Don't be shy about turning to online dating sites to find a partner. Not very long ago, this population would never have considered using an app for anything, let alone to find a mate. Now, they are checking out such apps as OurTime, SeniorMatch and SilverSingles.

On its website, ForbesHealth noted, "If you're at the end of a long relationship, either due to the death of a partner or

a divorce, you can quickly enter this digital sphere, and it's amazing all the people you can meet," wrote Shannon Lundgren, a professional matchmaker in San Francisco.

This Senior Resources Guide did not review these sites and is not recommending any. But according to ForbesHealth, there are quite a few popular ones. The website pointed to some of what it considered top-rated ones.

ForbesHealth chose SeniorMatch as best for people new to online dating, and OurTime for people seeking out local events and meetups. It called Singles50 the site with the best video call features and Elite Singles the top one for international dating.

SilverSingles was listed as best for most suggested matches while Plenty of Fish was cited for its unique features. Christian Café was considered best for Christians, and Just Senior Singles was listed as having the best customer support. eHarmony was chosen as having the best matchmaking algorithm.

Google around. Check out more than one site and see what works best for you.

As the saying goes, it is better to be safe than sorry. ■

*This guide was written by Suzanne Pollak, senior editor/writer at the Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington. Learn more about JCA at [accessJCA.org](http://accessJCA.org) or call us at 301-255-4200. Follow us on Facebook at [facebook.com/AccessJCA](https://facebook.com/AccessJCA) or X/ Twitter at [twitter.com/AccessJCA](https://twitter.com/AccessJCA).*

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