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For today's seniors, it's never too late for sex education

HOW TO BE ACTIVE, STAY SAFE?

By **Vianna Davila**
Mercury News

Like any sex education seminar, this one covered the familiar topics: how to use a condom, how to protect against sexually transmitted disease. But some of the questions — How will Viagra affect my heart medication? Where does an 82-year-old man meet women? — signaled that the needs of this particular group were, perhaps, a little different.

News flash: Older people are having sex, and increasingly open about wanting to enjoy it. But with pleasure comes complications. Today's seniors are learning they are vulnerable to STDs and HIV; this week, Stanford and Veterans Affairs researchers released a study demonstrating the cost-effectiveness of HIV/AIDS testing for adults age 75 and up.

Add disease to the list of other chal-

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ONLINE EXTRA

Should this seminar on sexuality be offered at all senior centers? Vote and comment at www.mercurynews.com/news.

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lenges — learning how to work with an aging body, navigating a romantic realm that now includes online dating and sex toys — and suddenly it's a whole new world for seniors.

"I think as seniors get older, they need a lot more information," said Larry Saltman, 73, of San Jose, "because we're not dead yet."

Saltman was among the seniors who attended a "Sexuality and Aging" seminar sponsored by the San Jose Office on Aging. Today, representatives will discuss offering similar talks at all the city's senior centers.

Already, signs suggest the sessions will be popular. Pfizer claims Viagra has helped 25 million men. Baby boomers, the same folks who led the sexual revolution in the 1960s, now are becoming senior citizens.

After marching for sex, "They're thinking, 'Wait a minute, maybe I still deserve to have some,'" said Bryna Barsky-Ex, a psychologist and sex therapist with Kaiser Permanente Santa Teresa, who has counseled couples in their late 90s about how to enjoy their sexuality.

Different times

But generations like Saltman's did not grow up with the same comprehensive sex education offered today in most schools; these men and women were at least in their 40s and 50s when AIDS appeared on the scene.

In 2005, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 15 percent of new HIV cases in the United States were among people over 50.

Saltman, who sits on the San Jose Senior Citizens Commission, suggested a sexuality session after he and his wife, Linda, saw a program about the rising rates of STDs and HIV in older adults.

Last week's program, led by Barsky-Ex, was a reminder that seniors can have fun but also need to protect themselves, he said.

"Sexuality is not just for the young or the pretty or for penises working perfectly," Barsky-Ex said. "It's for everybody."

Saltman still speaks in the accent of his native Boston, where he said it was a "no-no to talk about anything like this" when he was young.

But the conversations are becoming easier. Nearly 40 people — some with canes and ranging from 60 to 90 years old — attended the seminar.

"Sometimes it was really quiet, like, 'Ooh,'" said Linda Saltman, 69, describing the session, which covered everything from lubrication to vibrators. "And then, when it was over, everybody was smiling."

But the topic can make some a little antsy.

"To be honest with you, this is the first time I've even given it thought," said Nasario Gutierrez, a gerontology specialist with Gardner Senior Center.

Uncomfortable topic

Dr. Susan Kegeles, co-director for the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies at the University of California-San Francisco, said people are often uncomfortable talking about sexuality; discussing the sexual proclivities of the elderly is even harder.

While the prevalence of sexual activity decreases with age, men and women still have sex well into their 80s and 90s, according to a study last year in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

But as more people divorce now, the chance of contracting diseases through multiple partners increases.

Jane Fowler's HIV-positive diagnosis at age 55 came as a shock. The few times she had sex after her marriage ended, condoms seemed unnecessary; she thought of them only as contraception.

"There is this denial among older people that this can happen to them," said Fowler, now 73 and the founder of HIV Wisdom for Older Women, based in Kansas City, Kan.

In Santa Clara County, people over 60 make up only 1.2 percent of the total number of HIV or AIDS patients. Those 50 to 59 years old make up 8.8 percent of the county's HIV/AIDS population, said Joy Alexiou, county public health department spokeswoman.

Experts said sex education is key to ensuring the percentages stay down. Just as important: learning that sex is about more than intercourse.

"Seniors need companionship," Saltman said. "Even if it's just touch, feel, the idea that somebody gives a hoot."

"It's part of life," said his wife, Linda. "Why keep it a secret?"

This was my first big story for the Mercury News, and I stumbled across it on my second day of the internship. Researchers at Stanford had just released a study about the cost-effectiveness of HIV/AIDS testing in older adults, which got my editor and I thinking about senior citizens and sex education. I had heard about so-called senior sex ed classes while I was a student at UC Berkeley Journalism School but the stories had never come to fruition; the Stanford study seemed like a good opportunity to look into the idea again. So I phoned up the San Jose Office on Aging and bingo! They had just put on a sexuality and aging course that very morning! That was the good news. The bad news was they had put on the session in the morning, and it was the afternoon when I called. Luckily, my contact at the Office on Aging was helpful and eventually helped get me in touch with one of the participants. I met up with him briefly at one of the city community centers; he gave a lovely interview and then was kind enough to put me on the phone with his wife, who had also attended the session. I pride myself on not being afraid to ask certain questions -- I've interviewed suspected murderers and the family members of murder victims. And yet I had a hard time working up the nerve to ask particular questions, such as why would you want to take a sexuality and aging class? Luckily, we all made it through the interview, which I think turned out great. This article was reprinted in a few other publications, including my hometown newspaper in San Antonio -- I got a few amused emails about seeing my byline on a story about seniors and sexuality, but I was quite proud! I wish I could have attended the actual classes and spoken with more seniors, because I think this is an important issue that deserves more attention. I know I had a great time writing it.

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