

Safe sex for seniors

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NEW YORK — As volunteers in hairnets served Styrofoam cups of Jell-O to the lunch crowd at a senior centre in Queens, another group of volunteers was distributing something that didn't quite fit in amid the card games and daily gossip: condoms.

"You're giving out condoms," said a wistful Rose C, 82, "but who's going to give us a guy?"

But this was no joke.

The condom giveaway is part of an effort by the **New York City Department of Aging** to educate older people about the risks they may face of contracting the virus that causes AIDS. After the condom giveaway, free HIV testing was offered.

AIDS education of the elderly has become an important issue as antiretroviral drugs that can keep patients living into their golden years changes the face of AIDS. Experts warn that ignorance about **HIV among seniors can lead to new infections.**

And those infections are happening. A physician from Howard University Hospital in Washington recently diagnosed unsuspected HIV in an 82-year-old.

So **HIV educators** have crafted a message of prevention and are taking it to senior centres and other locales where older people meet. They also hope to create a welcoming environment for people who already have the virus.

New York City has the most HIV cases of any U.S. city — nearly 100,000 — and is considered a leader in the area of **AIDS education for seniors**, with the City Council having budgeted \$1-million (U.S.) toward HIV education for older people.

"Often older people do not concern themselves with HIV and AIDS because they assume that they are not at risk, and that can be a tragic mistake," said Edwin Mendez-Santiago, New York City's commissioner of aging.

Frank , 72, happily pocketed his supply of official New York City condoms with their subway logo.

"I think it's a great thing," he said. "We used to go to the drugstore and wait for an hour or two before we got up the nerve to ask for them. Your parents didn't talk about it. Everything was street-taught."

A study last year by the AIDS Community Research Initiative of America projected that within the next decade, the majority of HIV-infected New Yorkers will be over 50.

Bernard Branson, associate director for laboratory diagnostics in the Division of HIV/AIDS Prevention at the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, said that people aged 50 to 64 accounted for 14 per cent of new HIV diagnoses in 2005, while those over 65 comprised only about 2 per cent of HIV diagnoses.

But Dr. Branson said doctors should consider the possibility of HIV at all ages, pointing out the HIV diagnosis of the 82-year-old.

At the **Peter Cardella Centre** in Queens, 66-year-old AIDS educator Edward Shaw recounted his own 1988 diagnosis and warned, "If you're still having sex, you need to know about HIV/AIDS."

Many of the seniors ignored him as they chatted with friends and settled in for pork chops and green beans.

"I think it should be done in areas where it's really needed," said Julia , 82. "These ladies are all by themselves for years and years and years."

But Marie , who gave her age as "39-plus," said lonely seniors might take unwise risks.

"They might pick somebody up on the street," she said. "They just think that at a certain age they can't get pregnant. They don't think they could get a sexually transmitted disease."

And Ms. C, who lost her husband of 62 years last October, did take the condoms.

"If I get a date," she said, "I'm going to use one of these."