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Fears and misconceptions about HIV/AIDS and the health care environment among US older adults

Anne K. Hughes
Michigan State University, USA

Abstract

HIV infections among those in the US aged 50+ are on the rise. However, many older adults do not see themselves as at risk. Knowledge about HIV/AIDS can interfere with help-seeking among older adults. The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions that older adults have about HIV and their awareness of risk. Eight focus groups were held with 48 adults ages 50+. The groups addressed general HIV/AIDS knowledge, HIV/AIDS and the aging population, and what older adults needed to know about HIV/AIDS. Data were analyzed via thematic analysis. Average age of participants was 60.5 years (range 51-81). Sample was majority Caucasian (75%) and female (56.3%). Analysis revealed that participants saw health care providers and the health care system as sources of infection. Many viewed the health care system with caution and held the view that health care environments are not safe for older adults. In addition, there was concern that the US blood supply is not safe, and remains a viable route of transmission for HIV.These findings indicate that older adults in the US continue to have misperceptions about HIV, its transmission, and the safety of the US health care system. These misconceptions can play a role in help seeking, as well as identification of risk. Older adults could benefit from education about HIV/AIDS, HIV risk and the common infection control precautions. Providers in health care settings should be aware of these misconceptions and can play an important role in patient education.

Biography

Anne K. Hughes is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at Michigan State University. She obtained her PhD from the University of Maryland, Baltimore in 2009. Her work focuses on health and aging, with specific interests in sexual health and sexual risk among aging women. She has received both internal as well as external funding for her research.