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## HIV/AIDS cases rise in older people

**Arelis Hernandez** | Sentinel Staff Writer  
June 27, 2008

The number of people older than 50 infected with HIV is rising across the state and the nation, say experts who worry seniors think they are not at risk for the virus.

In Florida, the number of newly diagnosed AIDS cases in people 50 and older rose from 11 percent in 1998 to 15 percent in 2006, according to state data.

"It's a problem," said Marlene LaLota of the Florida Department of Health's Bureau of HIV/AIDS. "We have an epidemic of HIV in older people in Florida."

Nationally, 15 percent of all new HIV/AIDS diagnoses occurred in people 50 and older, according to [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) data from 2005, the latest available. National data on human immunodeficiency virus cases have been available for only a few years, but experts say they are seeing a definite increase in new cases in this age group.

Anyone having sex needs to be tested -- regardless of age, said Debbie Tucci, program coordinator for the Orange County Health Department.

Free HIV tests are being offered in Central Florida today as part of National HIV Testing Day.

"It isn't who you're sexually active with, just that you are sexually active," Tucci said.

Many don't know

The state Bureau of HIV/AIDS estimates that 20 percent of Floridians living with HIV/AIDS don't know they are infected. Of 125,000 infected residents, about 26 percent are older than 50, according to the Florida Department of Health.

The virus is claiming older victims, many of whom are divorced or widowed people coming back into the dating scene, said senior epidemiologist Spencer Lieb of the Bureau of HIV/AIDS.

Violet Scott, 48, was the church girl who said, "Not me." As a mother of seven and grandmother of three, Scott said HIV was not even in her alphabet. During a routine physical at work, Scott decided to include an HIV test in her list of exams because "certain female problems didn't add up."

Three weeks later, denial became a reality.

"On May 21, 2001, I found out I was HIV-positive," said Scott, who was infected through sexual contact. "Not only was I positive, but I also had AIDS."

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**Taking control**

The first year, Scott kept silent from the shame. The second year, she decided to open her mouth with what she christened a calling from God.

"God didn't save me to be ashamed," said Scott, who started New Hearts Encouragement Ministries Inc. to support women affected by the virus with a Bible-based curriculum that teaches the gospel of safe sex. Now her diagnosis is more than three letters; it's an epistle of hope.

Scott has since moved from [Ocala](#) to [Parramore](#) Avenue in downtown Orlando, passing out bags of condoms and talking to people on the street about prevention.

"For me it's like a gift in a sense because it opened something up -- a new life," Scott said.

Perceived immunity isn't the only reason seniors are susceptible, said Anthony Chester, a senior health educator at the Stewart-Marchman Center in Volusia County. He said doctors don't do enough.

"A lot of doctors don't want to disrespect elderly people" by asking sensitive questions about their sex lives, Chester said.

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