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## **Aging Population Not Immune to “Young” Ailments**

Mononucleosis, sexually transmitted diseases, ear infections and strep throat. Most of the time, these ailments are associated with the younger crowd, right?

Yes – and no. Just because you’re over 50, you are still susceptible to any one of these disorders, says Robert G. Pope, M.D., Chief Medical Officer for the Senior Products on at Humana Inc., a Louisville-based healthcare company.

While these conditions may not be seen more frequently among the aging population, (with the exception of sexually transmitted diseases – more on this in a moment), a weakened immune system is what can make us more likely to pick up any of these diseases if we come in contact with an infected person.

“As we grow older, our bodies change; our immune system changes and therefore, so does our resistance,” explains Dr. Pope. He adds that immunity can be further compromised if we are sedentary, obese, inactive, or suffering from poor nutrition.

And it’s important to know that if we’re not really in good shape either mentally or physically, indicators of these conditions tend to last longer, too. Chances are that we might not recover quite as well; instead of a few days’ down time, we may find ourselves dragging around for weeks.

What’s more, the ailments may affect us differently than, say, a younger person. For example, the typical sore throat that usually points to mononucleosis, (or mono), may be much less common in the older person. Instead, mono may be confused with a stomach virus, since its effect on the liver of an older person could cause nausea, vomiting or abdominal pain.

“Other medical conditions, or medications that the patient is taking, could certainly cause the physician to be confused as to what’s really going on,” cautions Dr. Pope.

You may wonder why seniors are coming down with these types of illnesses. For one thing, we are living longer. For another, we may be retiring later; the workplace is an ideal breeding ground for many infectious diseases. Maybe we’re caring for our grandchildren. If they are in daycare, they are exposed to the germs of other children.

matte r e l e a s e

2

Grandchildren, who may pass along germs picked up from playmates, may be as likely to come home with a bug, as they are with a hug.

And what's this about Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)? Well, the use of erectile dysfunction prescription drugs might be responsible for increased sexual activity among seniors, as well as other contributors to a healthy sexual appetite, such as good physical condition, financial security and an improved mental outlook.

"There's much more of this than a generation ago," notes Dr. Pope. In fact, in 2006, a gynecologist at a long term care facility near Orlando, Fla., reported treating more cases of herpes and the human papilloma virus in this retirement community than she did in the entire city of Miami, pointing out that she even had a patient in her 80s.

So, you may ask, how do you protect yourself against these diseases? For starters, staying healthy with proper nutrition and exercise is key. Be aware of any symptom that is persistent, and be sure to have your doctor check it out. Aside from a complete physical examination, make sure you tell your doctor about any medication you are taking on a regular basis, and keep a detailed history of all your symptoms. Wash your hands or use a hand sanitizer frequently, especially after any public contact.

Dr. Pope also cautions against using antibiotics unless there is a "high suspicion of bacterial infection."

Most importantly, realize that although you may be older and wiser, you are still vulnerable to any of the diseases you may have written off to younger age.

Make sure you discuss any suspicious symptoms and routine health screenings appropriate to your age with your physician.