

Suicide and Older Adults

In this fact sheet, the term "older adults" refers to persons over the age of 65. Information presented refers to the latest available data (i.e., 2012 data unless otherwise cited).

- While older adults made up only 13.7% of the population in 2012, they accounted for 16.3% of the suicides.
- Each day, 18 people over the age of 65 die by suicide—one every 79 minutes.
- In 2012, suicide rates ranged from 14.0 per 100,000 among persons aged 65 to 74 to 17.8 per 100,000 persons aged 75 to 84--38% higher than the overall U.S. rate of 12.9.
- White men over the age of 85 are at the greatest risk of all demographic groups. In 2012, the suicide rate for these men was 52.3 per 100,000—four times the current overall rate.
- Men account for 84% suicide deaths among older adults. The rate of suicide among men in late life is 6.5 times that for women (overall, men's rates were 3.7 times those of women as of 2012).
- In any given year, there are 150 suicide deaths among older adults in Tennessee. The 2012 suicide rate for adults over 65 in Tennessee was 21.0 per 100,000, above the state rate of 15.5.
- Although older adults attempt suicide less often than those in other age groups, they have a higher estimated fatality rate. For all ages combined, there is 1 suicide for every 20 attempts. Among the young (15-24 years) there is 1 suicide for every 100-200 attempts. Over the age of 65, there is 1 suicide for every 4 attempts.
- Nationwide, 72% of all suicides among older adults in 2012 involved firearms, with men (79%) using firearms more than twice as often as women (35%).
- Alcohol or substance abuse plays a diminishing role in later life suicides.
- Contrary to popular opinion, only a fraction (2-4%) of suicide victims have been diagnosed with a terminal illness at the time of their death. Two-thirds of older adult suicide victims were in relatively good physical health at the time. 80% of elderly suicides over 75 have seen a primary care physician within 6 months of their suicide. 75% have seen a physician within a month of their deaths; 35% within a week; 20% within 24 hours.
- The vast majority of elderly suicide victims have at least one psychiatric diagnosis. Two-thirds of these diagnoses are for late-onset, single-episode clinical depression.
- As many as 75% of depressed older Americans are not receiving the treatment they need.
- Elderly persons are less likely to reach out by calling a crisis line than their younger counterparts.

COMMON MYTHS ABOUT SUICIDE AND OLDER ADULTS

- Depression among the elderly is a normal consequence of aging and associated problems.
- Depression among the elderly cannot be treated.
- Most older adults who die by suicide are terminally ill.
- Elders who complete suicide do not have close family members.
- Only elderly persons who live alone are at risk for suicide.
- Suicide and suicidal behavior are normal responses to stresses experienced by most people.
- There is nothing that can be done to stop an elderly suicide.
- Most suicidal elders will self-refer to obtain mental health care.
- Suicidal elderly do not exhibit warning signs of their suicidal ideation or intent.
- Adverse living conditions are not significant risk factors in elderly suicide.