

At a Glance - Suicide Among the Elderly

- The highest suicide rates of any age group occur among persons aged 65 years and older.
- There is an average of one suicide among the elderly every 90 minutes.
- In 1998, suicide ranked as the sixteenth leading cause of death among those aged 65 years and older and accounted for 5803 deaths among this age group in the U.S.
- Suicide disproportionately impacts the elderly. In 1998, this group represented 13% of the population, but suffered 19% of all suicide deaths.
- The rate among adults aged 65-69 was 13.1 per 100,000 (all rates are per 100,000 population), the rate among those aged 70-74 was 15.2, the rate for those aged 75-79 was 17.6, among persons aged 80-84 the rate was 22.9, and among persons aged 85+ the rate was 21.0.
- Firearms (71%), overdose [liquids, pills or gas] (11%) and suffocation (11%) were the three most common methods of suicide used by persons aged 65+ years. In 1998, firearms were the most common method of suicide by both males and females, 1998, accounting for 78% of male and 35% of female suicides in that age group.
- Risk factors for suicide among older persons differ from those among the young. In addition to a higher prevalence of depression, older persons are more socially isolated and more frequently use highly lethal methods. They also make fewer attempts per completed suicide, have a higher-male-to-female ratio than other groups, have often visited a health-care provider before their suicide, and have more physical illnesses.
- It is estimated that 20% of elderly (over 65 years) persons who take their lives visited a physician within 24 hours of their act, 41% visited within a week of their suicide and 75% have been seen by a physician within one month of their suicide.
- In 1998, men accounted for 84% of suicides among persons aged 65 years and older.
- Suicide rates among the elderly are highest for those who are divorced or widowed. In 1998, among males aged 75 years and older the rate for divorced men was 3.4 times and widowed men was 2.6 times that for married men. In the same age group, the suicide rate for divorced women was 2.8 times and widowed women was 1.9 times the rate among married women.
- Several factors relative to those over 65 years will play a role in future suicide rates among the elderly, including growth in the absolute and proportionate size of that population; health status; availability of services, and attitudes about aging and suicide.
- Seniors are also greatly impacted by the suicide deaths of their children and grandchildren.