

# Suicide and Older Adults

- While the elderly make up only 12.6% of the population, they account for 18.1% of the suicides.
- Each day 14 people over the age of 65 are lost to suicide--one every 101 minutes.
- The suicide rate for the elderly rose 9% between 1980 and 1992. However, rates have declined since that time.
- In 2003, suicide rates ranged from 12.7 per 100,000 among persons aged 65 to 74, to 16.4 per 100,000 persons aged 75 to 84--52% higher than the overall U.S. rate.
- White men over the age of 85 are at the greatest risk of all demographic groups. In 2003, the suicide rate for these men was 51.6 per 100,000, more than four times the current overall rate.
- 84% of elderly suicides are men. The rate of suicide among men in late life is almost eight times that for women (overall, men's rates were 4.1 times those of women as of 2003).
- Although older adults attempt suicide less often than those in other age groups, they have a higher completion 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.
- Firearms are the most common means of completing suicide among the elderly, with men (78%) 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.

In this fact sheet, elderly refers to persons over the age of 65. Information presented refers to the latest available data (i.e., 2000 data unless otherwise cited).

Sources: Tennessee Department of Health, American Association of Suicidology.