

America's rural elderly face barriers to health care

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Study finds chronic disease less common among city seniors.

(HealthDay)—Elderly Americans who live in rural areas are at increased risk for health problems and death because of poor access to health care, a new study finds.

"It's been known for some time that [health care](#) is harder to access in [rural areas](#), and this [study] helps us better understand the extent of the problem," study leader Leah Goeres, of Oregon State University, said in a university news release.

The researchers looked at 296 adults aged 85 and older living in rural and urban areas of Oregon. They found that rural residents had much higher levels of chronic disease, took more medications (average of 5.5 versus 3.7) and had a shorter median survival time (3.5 years vs. 7 years).

Use of many medications can be dangerous for people in their 80s and 90s, the investigators noted.

Compared to their urban counterparts, rural seniors were less likely to take medications for bone [health](#), but more likely to take narcotic painkillers and high blood pressure medications. Both groups used a large number of over-the-counter products, including vitamins, minerals and herbal supplements, the study found.

The researchers said rural seniors were more likely to have risk factors for [chronic diseases](#), such as being poor, low level of education, history of chronic disease and being female.

The researchers also noted that urban seniors were more likely to live with someone and/or have a large social network, which can help protect against chronic disease.

The study was recently published in the *Journal of Rural Health*.

"Many physicians do the best they can in rural areas given the challenges they face. But there are fewer physicians, fewer specialists, a higher caseload," Goeres said. "Doctors have less support staff, and patients have less public transportation. A patient sometimes might need to wait months to see a doctor, and have to drive significant distances. Adverse effects can increase from taking multiple medications."

These barriers to choice and access affect the quality of care that's available, Goeres said.

More information: The Rural Assistance Center has more about [rural health disparities](#).

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