

Older adults may need better follow-up after ER screenings for suicide

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According to the World Health Organization, suicide rates for men over the age of 70 are higher than in any other group of people. In 2015, almost 8,000 older adults committed suicide in the U.S., and the proportion of suicides is higher among older adults than younger people. When older adults try to commit suicide, they are more likely to be successful compared to younger adults. This is why suicide prevention strategies are especially important for older men and women.

Hospital emergency departments (EDs) are caring for an increasing number of people with [mental health](#) concerns, including thoughts or actions related to [suicide](#) attempts. For example, nearly half of the [older adults](#) who committed suicide had visited an ED in the year before their death. However, when healthcare providers see older adults in the ED, some may be too quick to assume that the warning signs for suicide are just a natural part of aging. As a result, many older adults may not get the help they need to address suicidal thoughts. These facts prompted a team of researchers to study older adults seen in EDs and the related risks for committing suicide. Their study was published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

The researchers reviewed ED records from 800 people, including 200 older adults. They discovered that:

- 53 percent of older adults had a chief complaint involving "psychiatric behavior" (behavior relating to mental illness or its treatment), compared to 70 percent of younger adults.

- 93 percent of older adults had documented suicidal thoughts in the past two weeks compared to 79 percent of younger adults.
- 17 percent of older adults reported attempting suicide in the past two weeks compared with 23 percent of younger adults.
- Less than 50 percent of the older adults who showed warning signs for suicide following screening received a mental health evaluation, compared to 66 percent of younger adults in the same situation.
- Only 34 percent of older adults who had attempted suicide or had [suicidal thoughts](#) were referred to mental health professionals, compared to 60 percent of younger adults.

The researchers concluded that improving responses to suicide risk detection, as well as improving mental health treatment for older adults at risk for suicide, could reduce deaths from suicide among older adults.

If you know someone in a crisis or who is suicidal, try to get the person to seek help immediately from an ED, healthcare provider, or mental health professional. If you are thinking about harming yourself or attempting suicide, tell someone who can help right away by calling 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (800-273-8255).

More information: Sarah A. Arias et al, Disparities in Treatment of Older Adults with Suicide Risk in the Emergency Department, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/jgs.15011](https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.15011)

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