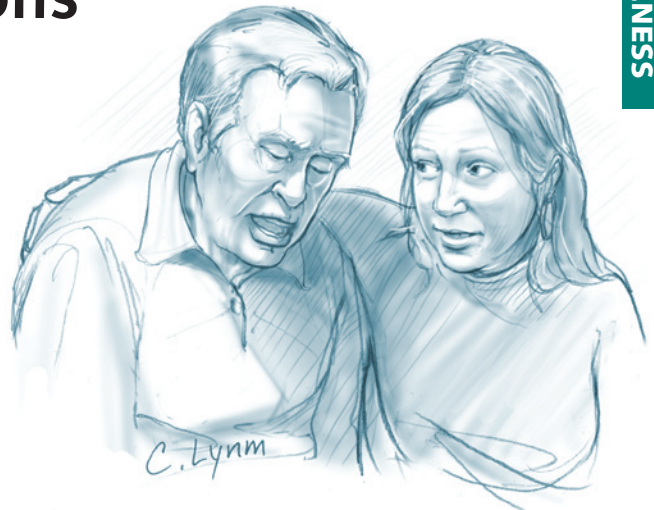


Suicide in Older Persons

Suicide increases with age and is most common in persons aged 65 years and older. That age group accounts for 18% of all suicides in the United States. As is true for younger individuals, the main factor that can lead to suicide in older persons is **major depression**, a medical illness to be distinguished from normal feelings of sadness and grief after a loss, such as the death of a relative or friend. Older persons are more likely to be socially isolated and have more physical illnesses than younger people. They are also more likely to use highly lethal methods of suicide, such as firearms.

The March 3, 2004, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about an intervention program to prevent suicide in depressed elderly patients.



SYMPTOMS OF MAJOR DEPRESSION

Having at least 5 of these symptoms occurring nearly every day for at least 2 weeks:

- Feeling sad, down, or empty
- Decreased interest or pleasure in activities
- Appetite change with weight loss or gain
- Sleeping more or less than normally
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feeling guilty or worthless
- Difficulty thinking or concentrating
- Being either slowed down or restless and irritable
- Feeling that life is not worth living, or thoughts of death or suicide

ADDITIONAL RISK FACTORS FOR SUICIDE IN OLDER PERSONS

- Heavy alcohol use
- Presence of mental disorders in addition to depression
- Presence of a serious physical illness
- Social isolation, particularly after the death of a spouse or close friend
- Access to firearms

PREVENTING SUICIDE

Antidepressant medications and psychotherapy (talk therapy) are very helpful in treating depression in older persons and can prevent suicide. If you or a loved one has symptoms of depression, see a doctor for an evaluation. Depression is an illness that should be treated, not a sign of weakness or of aging.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Psychiatric Association, National Institute of Mental Health, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
888/333-2377
www.afsp.org
- American Psychiatric Association
888/357-7924
www.psych.org
- The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide
US Department of Health and Human Services
www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calltoaction

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and other JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on *JAMA's* Web site at www.jama.com. Many are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on psychiatric illness in older adults was published in the June 7, 2000, issue; one on adolescent suicide was published in the December 26, 2001, issue; and one on depression was published in the June 18, 2003, issue.

