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Report: U.S. Suicide Rate Highest Among Older Men

Suicide is a preventable tragedy but remains a leading cause of death in the United States. Adults aged 55 and older represent a large percentage of Americans who lose their lives to suicide annually. The National Center for Health Statistics has published a [report](#) documenting suicide rates among older adults over the course of two decades, from 2001 to 2021.



Key Findings

The National Vital Statistics System found these significant data points among adults over age 55 for the year 2021:

- Men aged 85 and over died by suicide at a higher rate than any other group studied.
- Women aged 55 to 64 had the highest rate of suicide among women studied.



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- Men aged 55 to 64 and women aged 65 to 74 showed the biggest increase in suicide rates over the 20 years studied.
- Men had significantly higher suicide rates than women across all age groups.

Factors Affecting Suicide Rates Among Older Adults

The most significant factors that contribute to suicide rates among older adults relate to a decreased quality of life, according to the researchers. These include:

- Decline in physical or cognitive abilities
- Loss, bereavement, loneliness, or lack of community connection
- Poor mental health

A Closer Look at Suicide Rates Among Older Men

Among older men, the findings demonstrated that suicide rates increased with age. In 2021, there were 26.6 suicide deaths per 100,000 men aged 55 to 64 and 26.1 deaths among men aged 65 to 74. During the same timeframe, however, 38.2 per 100,000 men aged 75 to 84 and 55.7 men 85 and older died from suicide.

In addition, older men demonstrate higher rates of suicide than women of comparable





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age. Men 55 to 64 and 65 to 74 were three to five times more likely to die by suicide than women in the same age groups. This contrast becomes more pronounced among even older men, with suicide rates among men 85 years old and above almost 17 times that of women that age.

At the same time, suicide rates rose over time for older men. Among one age group of males in particular, this increase proved substantial. From 2001 to 2021, suicide deaths among men aged 55 to 64 jumped by 25 percent.

Suicide Rates Among Older Women

According to the study, suicide rates have decreased among older women as they age. For example, the suicide rate of 7.8 among women aged 55 to 64 decreased to 3.3 among women aged 85 and older.

Methods of Suicide

Firearm-related suicides were the most reported mechanism of suicide, according to the data. Firearms are the leading method of suicide among men 55 and older. From 2001 to 2021, the use of firearms in deaths by suicide increased as men aged. The report found the following increasing rates for firearm deaths:



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- 19.2 deaths among men aged 65-74
- 32.1 deaths among men aged 75-84
- 45.9 deaths among men aged 85 and older

Women suffered more from poisoning or drug overdose-related suicide deaths. However, the number of poisoning or overdose-related deaths generally decreased with age.

Crisis Prevention Resources for Older Adults

In the spring of 2023, the U.S. surgeon general declared [loneliness](#) an epidemic for Americans. Some studies have suggested a link between [social isolation](#) and a higher risk of developing dementia. It remains critical to continue to commit to self-care as you age. Learn more about how to [prevent loneliness](#).

Despite the report covering the years 2001 to 2021, suicide rates were the highest they've been in decades in [2022](#). If you struggle with suicidal ideations, reach out to someone. Talking about your feelings and experiences with a loved one or a professional can offer you a moment of pause and remind you that you matter to others.





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Here are some resources for seniors and their families and caregivers struggling with suicidal thoughts:

- The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline launched in 2022 to offer confidential support 24 hours a day for those suffering from mental health distress. Call or text 988 to speak to someone if you are having a crisis. Note that the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK, will automatically transfer you to the trained 988 crisis counselors.
- The Crisis Text Line is a global resource available 24-7 to people in the U.S. and several other countries. Text “DESERVE” to 741-741.
- For military veterans, the [Veterans Crisis Line](#) offers resources, including an online chat that can support you and your loved ones. You do not have to receive veterans benefits to access a counselor.



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Recognizing Malnutrition in Older Adults

Malnutrition, which happens when the body does not get the nutrients it needs, is a major concern for seniors. Life-threatening malnutrition disproportionately affects those [85 and older](#). Recognizing malnutrition can help family members and caregivers know when to seek out medical care and assistance for their aging loved one.



Undernourished older adults can experience wasting, in which they have a low weight for their height. They may have micronutrient, macronutrient, or caloric deficiencies.

Some people with malnutrition can also have excess weight or obesity. These individuals have exceeded their caloric needs but lack essential nutrients to keep themselves healthy.





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Effects of Malnutrition

When malnutrition progresses, it can lead to adverse health consequences, resulting in hospitalizations and death. In addition to increasing these risks, malnutrition can lead to the following:

- Weakened immune system
- Decreased bone mass
- Muscle weakness
- Poor wound healing
- Problems with oral health, which can cause chewing difficulties
- Diminished cognitive functioning

Hunger Among Seniors

Older adults living in the community may have inadequate diets that fail to meet their nutritional needs. They may lack access to healthful food, such as fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and lean protein.

[Feeding America](#) reports that one in 14 adults aged 60 and older experienced [food insecurity](#) in 2021. Food insecure older adults had deficiencies in micronutrients such



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as iron as well as macronutrients such as protein. Those with disabilities had food insecurity rates twice as high. Seniors living in multigenerational households also experienced more food insecurity as families struggling to make ends prioritize the nutritional needs of their children.

Residents in long-term care facilities can encounter hunger as well. Malnutrition in a resident can indicate neglect. When staff do not provide adequate food and water or do not address the needs of residents, inadequate nutrition can result.

Elders living in the community and in nursing homes may experience hunger and malnutrition because of chronic health conditions that affect their eating habits or nutrient absorption.

Chronic Conditions and Malnutrition

Chronic conditions and acute illness can cause malnutrition in older adults. The [National Council on Aging](#) reports that approximately 95 percent of adults 60 and older have at least one chronic condition, and 80 percent have two or more chronic conditions.





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For instance, diabetes, cancer, and dementia can reduce appetite, making it challenging to consume enough nutritious food. These diseases can affect the metabolism as well.

When chronic conditions progress and result in hospitalization, older adults can face a heightened risk of nutritional problems. Sixty-five percent of hospitalized older adults are at risk of malnutrition, according to [WebMD](#).

Signs of Malnutrition

When malnutrition is the result of disease, the symptoms of malnutrition may be similar to the disease symptoms, per the [American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition](#).

The following signs and symptoms could suggest malnutrition in older adults:

- Sudden weight loss or weight gain
- Weakness
- Fatigue, complaints of tiredness, and lethargy
- Difficulty concentrating



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- Loss of appetite and trouble eating
- Swelling and fluid accumulation
- Ill-fitting clothes from weight loss or weight gain
- Mood changes, including becoming depressed, angry, or irritable
- Hair loss
- Complaints of being cold
- Thin, cold skin
- Slow recovery from illness

Additional Resources

If you notice indications of malnutrition in yourself or a loved one, these resources could help.

- Consult with a health care professional. A physician can help your loved one address their medical needs.
- Elders experiencing hunger could explore programs such as [Meals on Wheels](#), which delivers meals to homebound older adults for low or no cost.



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- Seniors who have limited income may also qualify for food stamps through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Learn more about [SNAP benefits](#) and whether your loved one may be eligible.
- This holiday, you may also want to check out these five tips on healthy [nutrition for seniors](#).
- Speak to a local, qualified [elder law attorney](#) if the poor nutrition could be a result of neglect. An attorney can take action against the nursing home or caregivers responsible for any [elder abuse](#) or neglect.



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Do Caregiver Duties Help Older Women Live Longer?

Despite the considerable level of stress that can come with serving as a unpaid caregiver, a new [study](#) now suggests that taking care of a loved one may in fact lead to increased longevity among older women.

The findings, published in The Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, revealed that women who said they were taking care of a loved one on a regular basis had a mortality rate 9 percent lower than that of non-caregivers over the course of the study.



While the study did not find a direct connection between caregiving and reducing risk of death, its authors describe the association as robust. As they point out, the existing literature about the health impacts of caregiving has been contradictory. Research in this area will therefore need to continue exploring the potential connection between reduced death rates among women who choose to take on caregiving responsibilities –





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as well as the reasons why this may be the case.

Women and Caregiver Responsibilities

Today, more than 35 percent of caregivers in the U.S. are age 65 or older, with caregiving services mostly undertaken by older women.

This study followed nearly 160,000 women aged 55 to 79 over roughly 20 years. The participants took part in two assessments 10 years apart.

The data was collected as part of several clinical trials focused on prevention of major chronic conditions in older women. However, the assessments included questions on caregiving. Participants were asked about whether they were actively providing caregiving aid to a loved one and, if so, how many hours they dedicated to the service weekly. About 41 percent of them reported serving in a caregiver role anywhere from less than once to more than five times a week.

The women also provided information on a number of other factors, including depressive symptoms, race, living status, smoking, and history of cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and hypertension.





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Results

The women who reported being a caregiver over the two assessments showed not only a 9 percent lower death rate from any cause than those who were not caregivers, but also a lower risk of death from cancer or cardiovascular disease. This proved to be the case no matter how frequently they reported performing caregiver duties. Other factors, including how old the women caregivers were or whether they lived alone, likewise did not appear to affect this result.

Need for Further Research Regarding Caregiving and Decreased Death Rates

Caregiving remains a critical need and will continue as Americans grow older and live longer. Currently, 10,000 people in the U.S. are turning 65 years old each day, according to [AARP](#).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified caregiving – whether paid or unpaid – as a major public health issue. Because caregiving is such an expensive service, many older people rely on family members to stand in the gap and provide their care. The resulting burden on family caregivers can include [burnout](#), lost wages, and a lack of support.





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“The burden of caregiving demands and their influence on health will be substantial in coming years,” co-author Michael J. LaMonte of the University of Buffalo-SUNY said in a [news release](#). “[It] is an increasingly important focus in epidemiologic research,” he adds.

Learn More

If you are serving as a family caregiver or are considering taking on such a role, be sure you do your research. You may not be aware of all the duties involved and could find help through various resources.

If you’re unsure what kinds of assistance may be available to you or your loved one, connect with an [elder law attorney](#) near you. They may be able to determine what programs you qualify for as well as how to pay for services.

In addition, you may benefit from checking out the following articles:

- [Becoming a Family Caregiver for an Ailing Loved One](#)
- [Caregiver Contracts: How to Pay a Family Member for Care](#)



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- [Survey Uncovers Caregiver Support Needs, Possible Solutions](#)
- [Q&A: What Are the Consequences of Becoming a Paid Caregiver for a Family Member?](#)

