

Report: Drug Deaths, Suicides Up Among Older Californians

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Older Americans are dying from drug overdose or suicide at much higher rates now compared to a decade ago, according to the latest America's Health Rankings Senior Report from UnitedHealthcare.

The report found suicides have increased by 13%, depression is up 9%, and drug deaths among people over 65 have doubled in the last 10 to 12 years.

Jeannette Zanipatin, California state director for the Drug Policy Alliance, said the last few years have been especially challenging.

"The pandemic didn't help in terms of folks using substances in isolation, not having access to treatment," Zanipatin explained. "This age group also tends to view treatment and mental health a lot differently than younger cohorts."

Among people ages 65 to 74, the drug-related death rate spiked 147% in the last decade. The report cites many as opioid overdoses, particularly from fentanyl poisoning. In addition, the early death rate shot up for adults 65 to 74 during the pandemic, after falling for a decade.

Dr. Rhonda Randall, chief medical officer for UnitedHealthcare employer and individual, said the social distancing required during COVID has taken a particularly heavy toll on older people.

"The risk of social isolation is measuring a lack of meaningful social connectedness among seniors," Randall pointed out. "Things that put you at risk are being never married, widowed, divorced, separated, living alone, living in poverty."

The report did have some good news. Researchers found the percentage of adults over 65 who report being in "very good or excellent" health increased by 13% from 2011 to 2020. And flu vaccinations are up. More than 67% of seniors get flu shots, compared to about 60% in 2011.