

Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: Opioid Epidemic and Older Adults

Between May 2020 and April 2021, drug overdoses caused more than 100,000 deaths in the U.S., according to provisional data from the National Center for Health Statistics. And a new analysis suggests that many of these deaths are from a somewhat surprising group: older Americans.

According to a new study published in JAMA Network Open, opioid overdose deaths rose tenfold between 1999 and 2019 in adults ages 55 and older, surging from 0.9 deaths per 100,000 people to 10.7. The data comes from a twenty year study. In 2019, nearly 10,300 people ages 55 and older died from opioid overdoses, compared to just over 500 in 1999. During the study period, 79,893 U.S. residents 55 and older died from an opioid overdose.

Experts maintain much less is known about overdoses in older Americans than in younger ones. This lack of attention, plus a culture rife with ageism, can conceal the threat opioids pose to older people. Most individuals have a preconceived notion that older people do not use recreational drugs. This is especially dangerous because older people face unique risk factors for opioid overdose.

Older people are more likely to suffer from chronic conditions and to be prescribed multiple medications, which can make an opioid prescription more likely; as patients get older, they are more likely to have an opioid prescription, according to data published in 2020 by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Drug abuse is also on the rise among older people; emergency department visits for opioid misuse rose 220% between 2006 and 2014 in people ages 65 and older, according to a study published in the journal Innovation in Aging in 2019. Older people's bodies may be physically less able to metabolize opioids, which can make them more vulnerable to overdoses than younger people.

Evidence from alcohol use disorder suggests older people may respond better than younger people to substance-use treatment, possibly because they might be more likely to have traits like "wisdom, complex decision-making skills, emotional regulation, and self-reflection," the study authors note.

Going forward, including older people in outreach efforts (by making treatment easier to access for people with mobility issues, hearing or vision impairments, for instance) and being attuned to generational differences, such as reluctance to seek therapy, will be key.

JAMA Network Open is a monthly open access medical journal published by the American Medical Association covering all aspects of the biomedical sciences. For more information, please visit www.jamanetwork.com

The SAFE Glen Cove Coalition is conducting an opioid prevention awareness campaign entitled. "Keeping Glen Cove SAFE," in order to educate and update the community regarding opioid use and its consequences. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us on www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or visit SAFE's website to learn more about the Opioid Epidemic at www.safeglencove.org.