

Coachella Valley seniors exhibit healthy behaviors



Victoria Pelham, The Desert Sun 7 p.m. PST November 23, 2014



(Photo: Steve Mason/Getty Images)

A [recent report](http://www.harcddata.org/UserFiles/File/HARC_SeniorReport.pdf) from the Health Assessment Resource Center found that Coachella Valley adults ages 55 and up — nearly half of the adult population in the retiree- and snowbird-heavy desert — fare better than younger adults in many health behaviors but still face a range of challenges.

"We have significantly more seniors than in many other places, so just by sheer numbers alone, we need to be sure we're aware of their health," said Jenna LeComte-Hinely, research director for HARC.

In Riverside County, the median age is 32. In the Coachella Valley, it's 53.

"Just by the nature of aging, older age is often when many chronic illnesses present and when health deteriorates for many people, so I think those two things coming together combine to say we have some serious health issues we need to keep track of and keep on top of," she said.

Valley seniors are almost all insured, significantly more likely to be so than younger adults. They're also more likely to have used their benefits in the past year and engaged in preventive health care such as screenings. They tend to smoke cigarettes less and abuse alcohol less through binge drinking — though drinking is still common with more than 60 percent in each age group having at least one alcoholic drink in the past month.

About 84 percent participate in aerobic exercise — and more than half do so five or more times per week. Due in part to on-average higher income levels than their younger valley counterparts, they also tend to struggle less with food access and other barriers to care.

But while many of the valley's seniors are involved in wellness and holistic health as they settle down in a valley sometimes known for its outdoor golfing, hiking, active communities and top-notch care, health behaviors do not account for everything.

"Overall, Coachella Valley seniors have a strong foundation for good health," the report said. "However, the needs of those with chronic illness, mental health concerns, and transportation concerns must be addressed in order to maintain a healthy and happy senior population.

"Senior-specific concerns, such as elder abuse and injury-causing falls, are also issues that must be addressed in order to ensure a healthy aging population in the Coachella Valley."

They screened regularly for conditions and diseases like cancer, women's health and blood cholesterol.

But Coachella Valley seniors still had higher rates of major disease and chronic illness, "not surprisingly" when taking aging into account: high blood pressure, high cholesterol, arthritis, cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis, heart attack and stroke. More than half had one or more of the three most common — arthritis, high blood pressure and cholesterol.

LeComte-Hinely said that though she was expecting higher rates of chronic illness, she was surprised by almost half having arthritis diagnoses.

"That has serious implications in terms of their mobility and ability to move around," she said.

"All these things are connected; they're not silo-ed out," said Jack Newby, director of development for Mizell Senior Center in Palm Springs.

Falls 'an epidemic'

Falling — which can lead to serious injury for the elderly — affected 14.1 percent of seniors, hurting 9,245 people. And nearly 30 percent are afraid of doing so. Two desert hospitals fell below average for patient fall rates in another recent hospital safety report.

Studies in the past have shown that if a senior falls and breaks their hip in California, they're much more likely to die within a year.

"If there was any other epidemic affecting 23,500 people in this valley, we would all be taking notice," Newby said. "This is hidden. It's almost the accepted fact that grandma's going to fall and break a hip. Well, grandma doesn't need to fall and break a hip. There's something that can be done about it, but we need to really need to do it."

Newby said falls are preventable and avoiding them could save thousands and thousands of dollars in medical care. Fear of the issue itself can cause isolation among seniors, because they feel safer if they just stay at home — but that can actually work against them by atrophying muscles because of

lack of use. Then seniors are not used to walking around objects anymore and fall easier.

Fear of falls can also cause seniors to avoid walking or social activities that can have other health consequences.

The HARC report also found that older adults struggled with mental health. Experts have said seniors can suffer mentally as a result of chronic pain, isolation and losing loved ones. Almost 16 percent of valley seniors had a mental health problem in the past year that concerned them.

Depression is the most common disorder with about 10 percent of seniors diagnosed. Most with concerns had visited a doctor for it, but the most common treatment was just medication. And nearly 3,000 had considered suicide within the past year.

Newby said isolation because of transportation can make mental health issues worse, on top of things like financial worry, loss and health issues, exacerbating late-life situational depression.

Six percent of seniors need transportation assistance in this valley with some remote, rural areas separated by dusty highways.

Once seniors can no longer drive, there are limited options — taxi vouchers but taxis can be expensive in the valley, Newby said. There is also a SunLine senior route, but there is a half-mile limitation, and sitting outside waiting for the buses in 120-degree summer heat can be a "debilitating" challenge. Mizell has been active in trying to build a shade structure.

"Transportation for seniors is a major issue and it's an isolating issue," he said.

Some health concerns for seniors came from other members of the community.

Elder abuse, though "relatively rare," still affected 4 percent of seniors in 2013 — a jump from 1.7 percent in 2010 — and 6.9 percent financially. And experts say rates may be even higher due to dementia and under-reporting. Efforts have been [gaining momentum \(/story/news/health/2014/08/31/assisted-living-bill-seniors/14916681/\)](#) in the past year to fix problems, but there is still limited oversight.

"Many have caregivers, and caregivers often need support as well in unique ways," she said. "Hopefully by addressing caregiver needs, elder abuse can be reduced. Providing those caregivers with resources they need so they aren't stressed out and don't lash out, I think, would help with that."

LeComte-Hinely said she hopes the study will help agencies serving valley seniors to prioritize their needs and secure grant funding for specific programs and services. With the inclusion of a resource list, HARC also hopes the report will point to services that already exist here to help seniors.

"Many people aren't aware of the resources that are out there for them for these issues, and they think they have to go through this alone and that's not the case in many instances," she said.

Valley senior health by the numbers

- 93.9% of seniors have some type of health insurance, compared with 63.4% of younger adults; 61% vision coverage, 41% dental. About 40.6% of seniors did not use all of insurance benefits in the past year.
- 84.1% had visited a healthcare provider in the past six months — doctor's office usual source of care. 9.6% used ER as primary health care source
- Understanding what is covered by their plan was largest barrier to care: 13% or 22,013 struggled with it
- Preventive care: 94.3% have had blood cholesterol screening (88.7% within past year), 57.8% had visited dentist within the past six months (with cost being the largest deterrent), 68% of senior women had breast health exam and 40% pap-smear within past year
- Health behaviors: 69.5% (75,011 seniors) had drink in past month; just 18.2% had binge drank (compared with 42.3% of younger adults). 9.7% of valley seniors smoke every day or some days. About half (86,161) had been sexually active in past year; only 11.6% of which report using a condom. 72.3% had never been tested for HIV.
- Significantly higher rates of every major disease measured (compared with younger adults) except respiratory disease, asthma, liver disease and TB; 47.7% arthritis
- Skin cancer is the most common type among seniors — 36.2% or 15,511
- About 4.1% of valley seniors need help for basic daily tasks like eating or bathing; 5.1% can't live alone because they need help for "independent" tasks like medication management. 85% of these have caretakers to help.
- 9.9% of valley seniors (16,959 people) have been diagnosed with depressive disorders

•Nearly 40% of valley seniors exercise every day, mostly aerobic, not strength-building

•More than 60% are "overweight" or "obese," roughly same as younger valley adults, linked to coronary heart disease, stroke, osteoarthritis, type 2 diabetes

•On the flip side, food insecurity — cutting or skipping meals to save money — "remains an issue" for seniors. About 4.1% of valley seniors are food-insecure.

•About 14.1% have fallen once or more in the past three months; of those, about 38.4% were injured. 29.8% fear falling, which can lead to avoidance of walking and social activities that can have other health consequences.

Resources for seniors and caregivers

- [America's Health Rankings - Senior Report \(http://www.americashealthrankings.org/senior\)](http://www.americashealthrankings.org/senior)
- [NIH Senior Health \(http://www.nihseniorhealth.gov/\)](http://www.nihseniorhealth.gov/)
- [Riverside County Office on Aging \(http://www.rcaging.org/\)](http://www.rcaging.org/), La Quinta office: (760) 771-0501
- [Skilled nursing facilities \(http://www.skillednursingfacilities.org/\)](http://www.skillednursingfacilities.org/)
- **Senior centers in the valley:** The Cathedral Center, Desert Hot Springs Senior Center, The Eleanor Shadowen Senior Center, Indio Senior Center, Joslyn Center, La Quinta Senior Center, Mizell Senior Center, Thermal Senior Center

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