

Is Your Patient Suicidal?

1 in 10 suicides are by people seen in an ED within 2 months of dying. Many were never assessed for suicide risk. Look for evidence of risk in *all* patients.

Signs of Acute Suicide Risk

- ❖ Talking about suicide
- ❖ Seeking lethal means
- ❖ Purposeless
- ❖ Anxiety or agitation
- ❖ Insomnia
- ❖ Substance abuse
- ❖ Hopelessness
- ❖ Social withdrawal
- ❖ Anger
- ❖ Recklessness
- ❖ Mood changes

Other factors:

- ❖ **Past suicide attempt** increases risk for a subsequent attempt or suicide; multiple prior attempts dramatically increase risk.
- ❖ **Triggering events** leading to humiliation, shame, or despair elevate risk. These may include loss of relationship, financial or health status—real or anticipated.
- ❖ **Firearms** accessible to a person in acute risk magnifies that risk. Inquire and act to reduce access.

Patients may not spontaneously report suicidal ideation, but 70% communicate their intentions to significant others. Ask patients directly and seek collateral information from family members, friends, EMS personnel, police, and others.

Ask if You See Signs or Suspect Acute Risk—Regardless of Chief Complaint

1. Have you ever thought about death or dying?
2. Have you ever thought that life was not worth living?
3. Have you ever thought about ending your life?
4. Have you ever attempted suicide?
5. Are you currently thinking about ending your life?
6. What are your reasons for wanting to die and your reasons for wanting to live?

How you ask the questions affects the likelihood of getting a truthful response. Use a non-judgmental, non-condescending, matter-of-fact approach.

These questions represent an effective approach to discussing suicidal ideation and attempt history; they are not a formalized screening protocol.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

This 24-hour, toll-free hotline is available to those in suicidal crisis. The Lifeline is not a resource for practitioners in providing care.



10% of all ED patients are thinking of suicide, but most don't tell you. Ask questions—save a life.

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