



Elder Abuse

DEFINITION

Elder abuse is the mistreatment, neglect or exploitation of an older adult. While this abuse can be perpetrated by anyone, most often it is committed by someone the older adult trusts, such as a spouse or intimate partner. Compared to their younger counterparts, older survivors of domestic violence face increased vulnerabilities to abuse, which in turn increases their barriers to reaching safety.

There are several forms of elder abuse:

- **Physical Abuse**: Use of force (such as shoving or pinching) causing pain, harm, or physical injury; inappropriate use of medications or physical restraints.
- **Sexual Abuse**: Any nonconsensual sexual act, such as inappropriate touching or unwanted sexual comments.
- **Psychological Abuse**: Mistreatment that affects emotional or mental health, including: manipulation, threats, harassment, humiliation, infantilizing, and isolation.
- **Financial Exploitation**: The misuse or taking of an older adult's resources, possessions, and money for self-gain.
- **Neglect**: The willful deprivation of basic needs, such as clothing, food, shelter, or medical care.

PREVALENCE

Elder abuse affects nearly 5 million individuals every year.⁹ One in ten older adults will experience abuse in their homes.^{2,9} Despite its prevalence, only one in twenty-four cases are ever reported.⁶ In almost 60% of elder abuse and neglect incidents, the perpetrator is a family member. Two thirds of perpetrators are adult children or spouses.¹⁰

EFFECTS

Elder abuse has devastating effects on an individual's physical and mental health. Older adults who have experienced abuse are more likely to experience mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, cognitive impairment, post-traumatic stress disorder, decreased self-confidence, and sleep disruption.^{5,8} Compared to older adults who have not experienced abuse, older adults who have experienced abuse are three times more likely to be admitted to the hospital^{3,9} and four times more likely to be admitted to a nursing home.⁹ Older adults who have experienced abuse have a 300% higher risk of death when compared to those who had not been abused.⁴

INTERVENTIONS

It is essential that health care professionals are able to recognize the warning signs of elder abuse. Some warning signs include:

- Delay in seeking medical care and/or visits to many emergency departments
- Socially isolated (e.g., unable to connect with friends or family)
- Depression, anxiety, agitation, withdrawal
- Unexplained or untreated injuries, such as welts, pressure ulcers, bruising, burns, broken bones
- Dehydration and malnutrition
- Unsanitary or unsafe living conditions, such as hoarding
- Poor hygiene (e.g., soiled clothes, appearing unbathed or unkempt, etc.)

While there is no universally accepted tool, health care professionals should use evidence-based elder abuse screening tools that best fits their setting and their needs. Elder abuse screening should always be done without family or friends present. Professionals should ask questions in a way that allows the individual to tell their story without labels, judgments or conclusions. Multidisciplinary communication and coordination is the best way to identify and respond to abuse. Older adults experiencing abuse should be connected to appropriate community resources, including Adult Protective Services. Health care professionals are mandated to report any suspected abuse, neglect, self-neglect or exploitation of a vulnerable adult in the community to Adult Protective Services. Older adults experiencing abuse face many barriers to disclosing. Just because an individual denies abuse, doesn't mean it isn't happening.



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REFERENCES

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RESOURCES

- Center for Excellence in Elder Abuse and Neglect: “Elder Abuse for Clinicians” Lecture slides: http://www.centeronelderabuse.org/docs/RonChez_ElderAbuseforClinicians_slides.pdf
- ElderSAFE™ Center, Charles E. Smith Life Communities: <https://www.smithlifecommunities.org/care-services/eldersafe-care/>
- SAFE (Stop Abuse Against Elders): <https://chanabaltimore.org/find-help/elder-abuse/>
- SPRiNG Alliance: <http://www.springalliance.org/>
- Eldercare Locator: <https://eldercare.acl.gov/Public/Index.aspx>
- Futures Without Violence: Aging With Respect Safety Card: <https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/aging-with-respect-safety-card>
- National Center on Elder Abuse: Screening Tools for Health Care Providers: <https://ncea.acl.gov/NCEA/media/Publication/Elder-Abuse-Screening-Tools-for-Healthcare-Professionals.pdf>
- National Clearing House on Abuse in Later Life: Abuse in Later Life Resources for Healthcare Providers: http://s3-us-east-2.amazonaws.com/ncall/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/01103439/ALL_ResourcesHealthcare2019.pdf