

Preventing Elder Abuse

What is elder abuse?

Elder abuse is an intentional act or failure to act that causes or creates a risk of harm to an older adult. An older adult is someone age 60 or older. The abuse often occurs at the hands of a caregiver or a person the elder trusts. Common types of elder abuse include:¹

- **Physical abuse** is when an elder experiences illness, pain, injury, functional impairment, distress or death as a result of the intentional use of physical force and includes acts such as hitting, kicking, pushing, slapping, and burning.
- **Sexual abuse** involves forced or unwanted sexual interaction of any kind with an older adult. This may include attempted or completed unwanted sexual contact or penetration or non-contact acts such as sexual harassment.
- **Emotional or Psychological Abuse** refers to verbal or nonverbal behaviors that inflict anguish, mental pain, fear, or distress on an older adult. Examples include humiliation or disrespect, verbal and non-verbal threats, harassment, and geographic or interpersonal isolation.
- **Neglect** is the failure to meet an older adult's basic needs. These needs include food, water, shelter, clothing, hygiene, and essential medical care.
- **Financial Abuse** is the illegal, unauthorized, or improper use of an elder's money, benefits, belongings, property, or assets for the benefit of someone other than the older adult.

Elder abuse is associated with several risk and protective factors. However, having these risk factors does not always mean violence will occur. By using a public health approach that addresses risk and protective factors for multiple types of violence, elder abuse can be prevented.

How big is the problem?

Elder abuse is a serious problem in the United States. The available information is an underestimate of the problem because the number of nonfatal injuries is limited to older adults who are treated in emergency departments. The information doesn't include those treated by other providers or those that do not need or do not seek treatment. Additionally, many cases are not reported because elders are afraid or unable to tell police, friends, or family about the violence. Victims often have to decide whether to tell someone they are being hurt or continue being abused by someone they depend upon or care for deeply.

Elder abuse is common. Abuse, including neglect and exploitation, are experienced by about 1 in 10 people aged 60 and older who lives at home.² From 2002 to 2016, more than 643,000 older adults were treated in the emergency department for nonfatal assaults and over 19,000 homicides occurred.³

Some groups have higher rates of abuse than others. Compared with women, men had higher rates of both nonfatal assaults and homicides. The rate for nonfatal assaults increased more than 75% among men (2002–2016) and more than 35% among women (2007–2016). The estimated homicide rate for men increased 7% from 2010 to 2016.³

It is important to note that the number of nonfatal assault injuries are likely an underestimate because the data only included people treated in emergency departments.

Elder abuse can have several physical and emotional effects on an older adult. Many victims suffer physical injuries. Some are minor, like cuts, scratches, bruises, and welts. Others are more serious and can cause lasting disabilities. These include head injuries, broken bones, constant physical pain, and soreness. Physical injuries can also lead to premature death and make existing health problems worse.^{4,5,6,7}

Elder abuse can have emotional effects as well. Victims are often fearful and anxious. They may have problems with trust and be wary around others.⁴

How can we prevent elder abuse before it starts?

There are several important things we can do to prevent elder abuse:⁸

	Listen to older adults and their caregivers to understand their challenges and provide support.
	Report abuse or suspected abuse to Adult Protective Services.
	Educate oneself and others about how to recognize and report elder abuse.
	Learn how the signs of elder abuse differ from the normal aging process.
	Check in often on older adults who may have few friends and family members.
	Provide over-burdened caregivers with support such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • help from friends, family, or local relief care groups • adult day care programs • counselling • outlets intended to promote emotional well-being
	Educate oneself and others about how to recognize and report elder abuse.

The older adult population is growing faster in the U.S. than are younger populations. Many older adults require care and are vulnerable to violence perpetrated by a caregiver or someone they trust. More research is needed to uncover the causes for, and solutions to, violence against older adults.

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