

# Understanding Elder Abuse

## Fact Sheet

2016

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 occurs at the hands of a caregiver or a person the elder trusts. Six frequently recognized types of elder abuse include:

- **Physical**—This occurs when an elder experiences illness, pain, or injury as a result of the intentional use of physical force and includes acts such as hitting, kicking, pushing, slapping, and burning.
- **Sexual**—This involves forced or unwanted sexual interaction of any kind with an older adult. This may include unwanted sexual contact or penetration or non-contact acts such as sexual harassment.
- **Emotional or Psychological**—This refers to verbal or nonverbal behaviors that inflict anguish, mental pain, fear, or distress on an older adult. Examples include name calling, humiliating, destroying property, or not letting the older adult see friends and family.
- **Neglect**—This is the failure to meet an older adult's basic needs. These needs include food, water, shelter, clothing, hygiene, and essential medical care.
- **Financial**—This is illegally or improperly using an elder's money, benefits, belongings, property, or assets for the benefit of someone other than the older adult. Examples include taking money from an older adult's account without proper authority, unauthorized credit card use, and changing a will without permission.



### Why is elder abuse a public health problem?

Elder abuse is a serious problem in the United States. There is a lack of data, but past research found that:

- In 2008, one in 10 elders reported emotional, physical, or sexual abuse or potential neglect in the past year.<sup>1</sup>

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.



### How does elder abuse affect health?

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.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>



### Who is at risk for perpetrating elder abuse?

Several factors can increase the risk that someone will hurt an older adult. However, having these risk factors does not always mean violence will occur.

Some of the risk factors for hurting an older adult include:

- Using drugs or alcohol, especially drinking heavily
- High levels of stress and low or ineffective coping resources
- Lack of social support
- High emotional or financial dependence on the older adult
- Lack of training in taking care of older adult
- Depression

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## How can we prevent elder abuse?

The goal is to stop elder abuse before it starts. While not much research has been done, there are several important things we can do to prevent it:

- 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 emotional and instrumental supports such as help from friends, family, or local relief care groups; adult day care programs; counselling; or outlets intended to promote emotional well-being.
- Where prudent and possible involve more people than just family, formal caregivers, and guardians in health care or financial matters.
- Encourage and assist persons (either caregivers or older adults) having problems with drug or alcohol abuse in getting help.



## How does CDC approach elder abuse?

CDC uses a 4-step approach to address public health problems like elder abuse.

### Step 1: Define the problem

Before we can prevent elder abuse, we need to know how big the problem is, where it is, and whom it affects. CDC learns about a problem by gathering and studying data. These data are critical because they help decision makers send resources where they are needed most.

### Step 2: Identify risk and protective factors

It is not enough to know that elder abuse is affecting a certain group in a certain area. We also need to know why abuse occurs. CDC conducts and supports research to answer this question. We can then develop programs to reduce or get rid of risk factors and increase protective factors.

### Step 3: Develop and test prevention strategies

Using information gathered in research, CDC develops and evaluates strategies to prevent violence.

### Step 4: Ensure widespread adoption

In this final step, CDC shares the best prevention strategies. CDC may also provide funding or technical help so communities can adopt these strategies.



## Where can I learn more?

### Elder Abuse Helplines and Hotlines

Call 1-800-677-1116

*Always dial 911 or local police during emergencies.*

### National Center on Elder Abuse

[www.ncea.aoa.gov](http://www.ncea.aoa.gov)

### National Institute on Aging

[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)

### National Institute of Justice

[www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/crime/elder-abuse/welcome.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/crime/elder-abuse/welcome.htm)

*For more information on elder abuse, visit [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention).*



## References

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