

Preventing and Addressing Elder Abuse

No matter how old we are, we are all entitled to be treated as full members of our communities. Yet elder abuse is a significant challenge to our nation's belief in justice for all. Elder abuse is widespread and impacts everyone in our society. It takes away from our public health, civic participation, and economic resources. The mistreatment of older people can take many forms, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, financial exploitation, and neglect. Though as many as 1 in 10 older people are abused each year, a majority of cases go unreported for many reasons, including a lack of social supports needed to make reporting easier.

What We Can Do

We can reduce the risk of elder abuse by putting systems in place that can prevent abuse from the start. For example, we can create community supports and services for caregivers and older people that can reduce risk factors tied to elder abuse (such as social isolation). We can increase funding to provide training for people who work in aging-related care on the prevention and detection of elder abuse. We can identify ways to empower older people through senior centers and intergenerational programs that will reduce the harmful effects of ageism (biases against or stereotypes about aging that keep us from fully participating in our communities as we grow older).

In addition to building supports to keep our communities safe, it is also important that we recognize what abuse is and its warning signs. This makes it possible for us to report elder abuse and stop it in its tracks. We can all learn how to recognize, prevent, and report abuse.

Signs of Mistreatment

NEGLECT

- Lack of clean clothing or clothing inappropriate for the weather
- Lack of basic hygiene
- The home is cluttered, dirty, in need of repairs or the home has fire and other safety hazards
- The home does not have needed utilities such as electricity, working plumbing, heating/cooling

FINANCIAL ABUSE/ EXPLOITATION

- Unusual patterns of spending or withdrawals from an older adult's account
- Frequent purchases of inappropriate items
- Bills going unpaid or utilities being turned off
- The presence of a new "best friend" who is accepting generous "gifts" from the older adult

PHYSICAL ABUSE

- Bruises, especially on the head or torso, and those shaped like a hand, finger, or thumb
- Unexplained burns, cuts, sores, or other injuries
- Denying an older person enough food/water, needed medications, or assistive devices such as canes, walkers, hearing aids, and glasses
- Giving older adults unnecessary tranquilizers or sleeping pills, or confining or tying an older person to a bed or a wheelchair

EMOTIONAL/ PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

- Intimidation or yelling
- Making threats
- Humiliating or ridiculing someone
- Isolating an older adult from friends and keeping them from activities they enjoy for no good reason.

SEXUAL ABUSE

- Unexplained anal or vaginal bleeding
- Torn or bloodied underwear
- Bruises around the breasts or genitals

If there is an unexplained genital infection, we should look to have a conversation with the older adult's healthcare provider. If we don't know the name of the healthcare provider, try to get more information about the infection from the older adult and contact the authorities.

No matter how old we are, we deserve to be treated justly and as full members of our communities. We can all ensure that remains a reality for us as we age by reporting these or other signs of abuse to an Adult Protective Services agency that can investigate potentially abusive situations. We are the solution. If we notice that someone in our community is in immediate danger, it is up to us to call 911 or local police as soon as possible for help.

For more information concerning elder abuse, contact the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) at 1-855-500-3537, ncea-info@aoa.hhs.gov, or <https://ncea.acl.gov>.