

What is Elder Abuse?

Elder Abuse

Each year hundreds of thousands of older persons are abused, neglected, and exploited. Many victims are people who are older, frail, and vulnerable and cannot help themselves and depend on others to meet their most basic needs. Abusers of older adults are both women and men, and may be family members, friends, or "trusted others."

In general, elder abuse is a term referring to any knowing, intentional, or negligent act by a caregiver or any other person that causes harm or a serious risk of harm to a vulnerable adult. Legislatures in all 50 states have passed some form of elder abuse prevention laws. Laws and definitions of terms vary considerably from one state to another, but broadly defined, abuse may be:

- **Physical Abuse**—inflicting physical pain or injury on a senior, e.g. slapping, bruising, or restraining by physical or chemical means.
- **Sexual Abuse**—non-consensual sexual contact of any kind.
- **Neglect**—the failure by those responsible to provide food, shelter, health care, or protection for a vulnerable elder.
- **Exploitation**—the illegal taking, misuse, or concealment of funds, property, or assets of a senior for someone else's benefit.
- **Emotional Abuse**—inflicting mental pain, anguish, or distress on an elder person through verbal or nonverbal acts, e.g. humiliating, intimidating, or threatening.
- **Abandonment**—desertion of a vulnerable elder by anyone who has assumed the responsibility for care or custody of that person.
- **Self-neglect**—characterized as the failure of a person to perform essential, self-care tasks and that such failure threatens his/her own health or safety.

What are the Warning Signs of Elder Abuse?

While one sign does not necessarily indicate abuse, some tell-tale signs that there could be a problem are:

- Bruises, pressure marks, broken bones, abrasions, and burns may be an indication of physical abuse, neglect, or mistreatment.
- Unexplained withdrawal from normal activities, a sudden change in alertness, and unusual depression may be indicators of emotional abuse.
- Bruises around the breasts or genital area can occur from sexual abuse.
- Sudden changes in financial situations may be the result of exploitation.
- Bedsores, unattended medical needs, poor hygiene, and unusual weight loss are indicators of possible neglect.
- Behavior such as belittling, threats, and other uses of power and control by spouses are indicators of verbal or emotional abuse.

Most importantly, be alert. The suffering is often in silence. If you notice changes in a senior's personality or behavior, you should start to question what is going on.

Remember, it is not your role to verify that abuse is occurring, only to alert others of your suspicions. Please visit the webpage [What If I Suspect Abuse, Neglect, or Exploitation?](#) to learn what you should do if you are concerned that someone you know is being abused.

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