

Abuse and neglect of older adults: Understanding gender differences

Abuse and neglect in later life can affect a person's health, happiness and safety. Older adults can experience different kinds of harm from people they rely on or trust.

Abuse of older adults can occur at home, in the community, or in institutional settings. It can be physical, emotional, financial, sexual, spiritual or social. Abuse and neglect can include not giving medications or the necessities of life.

Both men and women can be abusive or neglectful. Older women are more likely to be victims of family violence than older men, in part because they usually live longer. That abuse or neglect more often comes from the older woman's spouse, partner or adult children. For an older man, the abuse or neglect is more likely from his adult children or close friends

Although older adults may experience harm from strangers, this is much less common, except for financial abuse or fraud.

When might the abuse begin?

Women are more likely than men to experience abuse in their younger years, which may continue into later life. The effects of many years of abuse can be hard on a person's health.

For older men, their first experience with abuse or neglect may occur in later life. It may begin after the man has developed a disabling condition and relies on others for help.

How do men and women experience abuse differently?

Abuse hurts both older women and older men. However, they may face different risks and be affected in different ways.

- Older women are more likely than older men to have experienced a history of emotional, physical or sexual abuse
- Older women may have fewer financial resources than older men, and may find it hard to leave an abusive relationship. Also, women tend to live longer than men. If a woman loses income or assets through financial abuse, it will affect her significantly and for a long period of time
- On average, a woman tends to be smaller than a man, and she may have less ability to defend herself from physical abuse
- Older women are more likely than older men to be widowed or live alone
- Older women are much more likely than older men to live in a residential care facility where abuse may occur from staff, volunteers or family
- Older men are less likely to have a network to provide support and protection
- Older men may depend on their spouse or partner to do the cooking and cleaning, making it harder to leave an abusive relationship
- Older men are likely to have a regular income, such as a pension, putting them at greater risk of fraud
- In some relationships, the man may be much older than the woman, making them more vulnerable

What are the similarities in abuse experienced by men and women?

Abuse and neglect affect older adults emotionally and physically. Both older women and older men may feel shocked, embarrassed, guilty or ashamed that someone they trust is hurting or taking advantage of them.

Both men and women may worry about how it reflects on their roles within the family and community, and their ability to be independent.

What is the most commonly reported type of abuse?

Financial abuse is the most commonly reported form of abuse faced by older adults. Older adults are vulnerable to this type of abuse because they may depend on others to help them with financial matters. Also, some older adults may lack experience with finances or online/ATM banking.

Why don't older adults get help if they are being abused or neglected?

Often older adults may not know of local resources available to them. Some older adults may feel that they must help and protect their spouse or children, even if they are abusive. The older adult may not think about the consequences or effects on themselves.

In spousal abuse, family members may discourage the parent from taking action. They may protect the other parent or may not want to take sides.

Some older women and men depend on others for help with daily living, and they may experience abuse from the provider. This can have a major impact on the older adult's decision on whether they can leave the situation and how to seek help.

An older adult's community, culture and perspective on life can also affect their response to the abuse. In many cultures, people expect families to keep problems private or hidden. Older immigrants may face language barriers to seeking help. They may also have no pension or other resources of their own, and they may have little family support.

If you are trying to help an older person who experiences abuse or neglect, it is important to understand the situation and how the person feels. Be aware of any stereotypes or assumptions you may have about older adults, families or diverse cultures. Try to understand the circumstances that can contribute to older adults not seeking the help they need.

What should I do if I see a crime of harmful situation?

Call the Seniors Abuse Info Line (SAIL) at 604 437-1940 in the Lower Mainland, or toll free at 1 866 437-1940.

If you see a crime or a situation that puts an older adult at immediate risk, call the police or **9-1-1** right away. Advise that you want to report a situation of suspected elder abuse, neglect or self-neglect.

For more information

For more information about elder abuse and neglect, or to get help, call or visit the following services:

- Seniors Abuse and Information Line (SAIL), hosted by Seniors First BC, 604 437-1940 in Vancouver or toll-free at 1 866 437-1940, or visit <http://seniorsfirstbc.ca/>
- Government of B.C. – Protection from Elder Abuse or Neglect visit www.gov.bc.ca/elderabuse
- Public Guardian and Trustee at 604 660-4444 or visit www.trustee.bc.ca
- Legal Aid BC at 604 408-2172 or toll-free at 1 866 577-2525 or visit <https://legalaid.bc.ca/>
- Victim Link toll-free in B.C. at 1 800 563-0808 or visit www.victimlinkbc.ca for information for victims of family and sexual violence or crime

For more information on abuse and older adults, see the following HealthLinkBC Files:

- [HealthLinkBC File #93a Preventing abuse and neglect in older adults](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #93b Abuse and neglect of older adults: Information for family caregivers](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #93d Financial abuse of older adults](#)

The logo for "seniors first BC" features the words "seniors" and "first" in a dark teal, sans-serif font, with "BC" in a lighter teal font to the right. The text is set against a white background with a subtle, light teal shadow effect.

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.