



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 take many forms including physical, emotional, financial, sexual, social, or spiritual, or withholding 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. Whereas, for an older man, the abuse or neglect is most likely from his adult children or close friends.

Although older adults may experience harm from strangers, this is much less common with the exception of 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.

Differences among women and men

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.
- 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 have disabling conditions, 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.

Because an older woman may have fewer resources, she may be reluctant to leave an abusive relationship.

Similarities among women and men

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.

A woman may be concerned about how it reflects on her as a mother or grandmother. A man may hesitate to tell anyone if he feels it will reflect badly on him.

Finances and risk of abuse

Financial abuse is the most commonly reported form of abuse faced by older adults. It may affect older women and older men in different ways.

- Older women are more likely to depend on others to help them with financial matters.
- Some older women may have less experience with finances or banking.

- Older men are likely to have a regular income, such as a pension, and therefore be at greater risk of fraud; however, they may also be better financially protected.

Women may have fewer financial resources, and they tend to live longer than men. If women lose income or assets through financial abuse, it will affect them significantly and for a longer period of time.

Seeking help

In helping 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.

- 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. They may not think about the consequences or effects on themselves.
- Many older women who experience abuse may feel concerned about finances if they leave a spouse or partner.
- 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 assistance with daily living, and they may experience abuse from them. 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 his or her 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.

For more information

If you see a crime or harmful situation occurring to an older adult, call the police or 9-1-1 immediately. You can also call 8-1-1 for information and advice, and speak to a registered nurse available 24/7 about non-emergency health concerns or questions. Translation services are available in over 130 languages on request.

For information and services, you can also contact:

- Home and Community Care Office in your local health authority whose staff has a responsibility to investigate more serious reports of suspected abuse or neglect.
- B.C. Centre for Elder Advocacy and Support plus the Seniors Advocacy and Information Line (SAIL) at 1-866- 437-1940 or visit www.bcceas.ca.
- Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee at 604-660-4444 or www.trustee.bc.ca.
- Legal Services Society at 604-408-2172 or toll-free at 1-866-577-2525 or visit www.lss.bc.ca.
- Call Victim Link toll-free in B.C. at 1-800-563-0808 for information for victims of family and sexual violence or crime.

For more information, see other topics in the HealthLink BC Files Elder Abuse Prevention Series.

[93a Preventing Abuse and Neglect in Later Life](#)
[93b Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults – Information for Family Caregivers](#)
[93d Financial Abuse of Older Adults](#)



For more HealthLink BC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles/index.stm or your local public health unit.

Click on www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** for non-emergency health information and services in B.C.

For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call 7-1-1 in B.C.

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