

Preventing abuse and neglect of older adults

Abuse and neglect in later life can affect an adult's health, well-being, safety and financial security. Older adults can experience different kinds of harm from people they rely on or trust. Abuse and neglect of older adults can occur at home, in the community or in institutional settings. Those who abuse are most often family members such as a person's spouse or children, but they can also include friends and caregivers.

What types of abuse or neglect can happen to older adults?

Abuse and neglect can take many forms including physical, emotional, financial, sexual, spiritual or systemic. Abuse and neglect can include withholding medications or the necessities of life. Some types of abuse and neglect violate an older adult's basic rights, and several types are crimes. Most people do not intend to become abusive or neglectful.

- **Physical abuse** includes violence, inappropriate restraint or rough treatment, even if it does not result in an injury
- **Emotional abuse** includes name calling, intimidation, threats or any treatment that offends an older person's sense of dignity and self-worth. Emotional abuse is often used to control an older person
- **Financial abuse** is the most common form of abuse reported by older adults. Examples of financial abuse include pressuring an older adult with requests for money, using an older adult's property or money without their permission, or improperly using one's authority under a power of attorney
- **Sexual abuse** occurs when a person pressures an older adult for intimacy, sexually harasses or sexually assaults them.

Sexual abuse can also include making sexual comments or jokes, and unwanted touching or leering

- **Violations of rights** means ignoring older adult's rights to privacy, information or community supports for which they are eligible
- **Neglect** refers to situations where a person has a duty to provide care or help to an older adult, but does not provide that care. For example, the caregiver might stop paying the bills, providing food, medication or other help to the older adult. Or, they may leave a dependent elderly person alone for long periods of time

Why does abuse or neglect happen?

Some people learn to abuse or use violence and control in their relationships. Others do not treat older adults with respect. When people experience personal problems or stresses, they might be at greater risk of harming or neglecting others. These factors may increase the risk of abuse.

Living together with older adults may create family tensions. In some cases, family pride can keep abuse hidden. Caring communities can help protect people from abuse and neglect.

What are the physical health effects of abuse and neglect?

Abuse and neglect can have harmful long-term effects on the health and well-being of older adults. The physical health effects will vary from person to person depending on their situation. These effects may be lessened if the older adult has emotional support from friends and family, and if they feel like they have some control over the situation.

In general, older adults have less physical strength and they are less able to defend themselves from physical abuse. The most obvious signs of physical abuse are falls, bruises, broken bones, burns, head injuries or injuries to the mouth.

Other physical health effects of abuse or neglect are less obvious. These may include sleeping difficulties, stomach problems or breathing problems. A neglected older adult may be severely dehydrated (not getting enough fluids) or suffer from malnutrition (not getting enough food).

Some signs of abuse, such as frequent injuries attributed to falls or confusion, may be mistaken as a part of aging. Some signs may look like health concerns that are common in later life. Older adults who experience abuse or neglect may also lose interest in life. They may change their habits such as eating, drinking or taking medications. They may experience depression or have suicidal thoughts. People may not recognize or identify these as abuse.

Living with abuse and neglect can increase a person's chances of getting sick or dying sooner. This stress may also make other health concerns worse.

What are the emotional effects of abuse and neglect?

Individuals who cause abuse and neglect to older adults often threaten, harass or intimidate them. They may create fears by threatening to not let the older adult see their grandchildren. They may also threaten to leave them alone, or place them in a long-term care home against the older adult's wishes.

Older adults often feel stressed, worried, anxious or depressed as a result of abuse and neglect. They may feel shame, guilt or embarrassment that a family member or someone close has harmed them. An older adult who feels abused or neglected usually loses trust in the person who causes harm.

Some older adults who have experienced abuse may use alcohol or prescription drugs to help them with sleep, anxiety or other concerns.

If you or someone you know is, or has been abused, you can seek counseling or join a support group to help with the emotional effects. If you are uncertain whether someone is being abused or neglected, call Seniors Abuse and Information Line (SAIL) to receive guidance about your concern.

How can abuse and neglect be prevented?

There are several ways you can help an older adult who may be or feel abused or neglected:

- Believe the older adult if they confide in you about a difficult situation
- Listen to the older adult in a non-judgmental manner
- Recognize abuse and neglect and speak up about it in a way that does not risk the older adult's safety
- Encourage the older adult to ask a professional for confidential help
- Know where to call to get help or information
- Respect the person's choices

If you are a service provider working with older adults, you can help as follows:

- Help older adults and families learn more about their rights and responsibilities
- Help older adults build or regain their confidence and skills
- Help reduce the person's social isolation
- Have appropriate resources to help older adults and families

Health professionals and other service providers are trained to recognize the common signs and screen for abuse and neglect, and they know how to help. They can help an older adult assess their own personal safety, and they can help develop a safety plan.

What should I do if I witness elder abuse?

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.

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

For more information

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

- Seniors First B.C. at <https://seniorsfirstbc.ca>
- Government of B.C. – [Protection from Elder Abuse and Neglect](#)

- Public Guardian and Trustee at 604-660-4444 or visit www.trustee.bc.ca if an older adult's finances are at risk
- 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 [VictimLinkBC](#) for information for victims of family and sexual violence or crime

For more information about abuse and older adults, visit the following HealthLinkBC Files:

- [HealthLinkBC File #93b Abuse and neglect of older adults: Information for family caregivers](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #93c Abuse and neglect of older adults: Understanding different experiences](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #93d Financial abuse of older adults](#)

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For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/health-library/healthlinkbc-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.