

Elder Abuse Facts

As an extension of ALFA's public awareness initiatives and ALFA's zero tolerance stance on elder abuse, ALFA encourages senior living communities to participate in World Elder Abuse Awareness Day on June 15th and to help prevent elder abuse year round. To help communities conduct a successful event, ALFA has provided information and resources on elder abuse. Use this information to help educate residents, staff, and family members on the prevalence and damaging effects of elder abuse as well as ways to detect and report elder abuse. For more information on World Elder Abuse Awareness Day visit alfa.org/elderabuse.

What is elder abuse?

Elder abuse refers to the intentional or neglectful acts of a caregiver, family member, friend, or other individual that lead to, or may lead to, harm of a senior citizen. The various forms of elder abuse include: physical abuse, neglect, emotional or psychological abuse, verbal abuse and threats, financial abuse and exploitation, sexual abuse, and abandonment. In some states, self-neglect is also considered elder abuse. The most common form of abuse is financial exploitation, with physical abuse, neglect, and emotional abuse following.

Physical Abuse: Any threat to or action that physically injures an older adult.

Emotional/Psychological Abuse: Verbal attacks, threats, isolation, or belittling acts that cause or could cause mental anguish, pain, or distress to a senior. Studies have shown verbal abuse is extremely damaging, taking an even greater toll on the mental health of women 50-79 than physical abuse.

Sexual Abuse: Sexual contact that is forced, tricked, threatened, or otherwise coerced upon a vulnerable elder. Sexual contact with an elder who is unable to grant consent (for example an individual with advanced Alzheimer's) is also considered sexual abuse.

Exploitation: The illegal use of an older adult's funds or property for the benefits of someone besides the older adult. This includes theft, fraud, and use of influence over the senior to gain control over an older person's money or property.

Neglect: A caregiver's failure or refusal to provide for a vulnerable elders safety, physical, or emotional needs.

Abandonment: Desertion of a frail or vulnerable elder by anyone who previously assumed a duty of care.

Self-Neglect: An inability to perform tasks relating to self care, which leads to, or may lead to, harm or endangerment.

How big is the problem?

It is uncertain how often elder abuse occurs because relatively few instances, only one in six, are reported. If you exclude cases of self-neglect, the problem of underreporting becomes even more apparent, as research indicates that only one in fourteen cases of elder abuse (not including self-neglect cases) are reported to the authorities.

It is estimated that more than one in ten elders may experience some form of abuse. The large discrepancy in the cases of elder abuse that occur and those that are actually reported means that most victims are not getting the help they need.

How serious is the problem?

The personal losses related to elder abuse can be devastating and include the loss of independence, home, life savings, health, dignity, security, and death. Studies show that even victims of mild elder abuse suffer devastating consequences. Victims of mild elder abuse, neglect, or financial exploitation are at a 300% increased risk of dying in the 3 years after mistreatment compared to their non-abused contemporaries.

Who is at risk?

Elder abuse is most likely to occur in a domestic setting and be perpetrated by the senior's adult child. Women and older elders, those over the age of 80, are at a higher risk for abuse. Other risk factors include: dementia, social isolation, poor physical health, and mental health and substance abuse issues of both abusers and victims.

Why does elder abuse remain such an “invisible” problem?

As all other forms of interpersonal violence, elder abuse usually happens in private settings. Victims often feel ashamed, embarrassed, or guilty. Family members are often the abusers, so elders may be in denial about the abuse or fear that they will get the abuser in trouble. Many older adults fear retaliation or that they will be forced to move into a nursing home. Some seniors, especially those with dementia, do not think they will be believed if they speak up.

What are the warning signs of abuse?

Abuse is not always evident. Any change in personality or behavior should be noted and investigated further. The following are indicators (provided by the Administration on Aging) that an elder may have been abused:

- 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.
- Strained or tense relationships, frequent arguments between the caregiver and elderly person are also signs.

What is needed to address the problem?

Public awareness is an important part of fighting elder abuse. Through World Elder Abuse Awareness Day and year-round awareness campaigns, we can help make the problem more visible. Enhanced services for victims and systems responses are also needed as well as more research on ways to prevent and address instances of abuse.

Senior living communities and companies can help by making sure there are clear procedures in place and that every employee understands the importance of prompt reporting of all suspected cases of abuse. Frequent education on the warning signs of abuse and a corporate culture of zero tolerance towards elder abuse can help make your community a safe place to live.

What can one do to help prevent elder abuse?

The following are things anyone can do to help prevent elder abuse.

- **Report any cases or suspected cases of abuse** to adult protective services or law enforcement. You can find your state agency on ALFA's website at alfa.org/states.
- **Look for potential warning signs.** Make a point of talking to the older adults in your life and make note of any shifts in personality or behavior that may signal abuse.
- **Volunteer.** There are many local opportunities to become involved in programs that provide assistance and support for seniors.
- **Participate in World Elder Abuse Awareness Day.** Help to raise awareness by talking about the issue. Visit alfa.org/elderabuse for more information on taking part in this event.

In addition to the above, senior living communities can help prevent elder abuse through following its company's policies on elder abuse.

Resources:

- **ALFA**
<http://www.alfa.org/ElderAbuse>
- **Administration on Aging**
http://www.aoa.gov/AoA_programs/Elder_Rights/EA_Prevention/weaad.aspx
- **National Center on Elder Abuse**
www.ncea.aoa.gov
- **National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse:**
<http://www.preventelderabuse.org/elderabuse/>
- **National Long Term Care Ombudsman Resource Center:**
<http://www.ltombudsman.org/>