

Elder Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation

Demographics

No accurate statistics on abuse and neglect are available. However, it is estimated that up to two million older adults are abused annually in the United States. And the problem is expected to get worse as our population ages and becomes sicker.

Older adults are unlikely to report abuse because they fear retaliation, are ashamed of the problem or have limited alternatives for living arrangements.

Health professionals fail to report abuse because of ignorance of the problem, ignorance of their legal responsibilities to report suspected cases, lack of knowledge about or failure to adequately assess at-risk situations and fears that an alternative living arrangement may be less tolerable than the current one.

Older adults are at risk for abuse from health care providers, family members and caregivers. Abuse occurs in all socioeconomic groups, in all levels of education and by both sexes with men being only slightly more abusive than women.

Older adults residing in nursing facilities and those living with younger family members are at the greatest risk.

The most common type of abuse is spousal followed by child abuse then caregiver abuse.

The most important contributing factors in abuse is the older adult's loss of physical independence (incontinence, frailty, altered mobility, and altered dexterity), mental deterioration (confusion, dementia psychosis or depression), and/or loss of financial independence, any of which can place a tremendous burden on already stressed spouses, children or caregivers.

Having said that, bear in mind:

- most people in the United States today are expected to live beyond age 75
- as the number of older adults grows, an increasing number of patients in health care facilities will be elderly
- approximately 23% of people over 65 years of age have one or more self-care deficits
- 40% of people over 75 years of age reportedly suffer from dementia

- the population of persons 85 years of age and older is growing six (6) times faster than the population as a whole
- As our population ages multiple disease processes and resulting medication therapy increases, thereby further stressing financial demands on already strained fixed finances
- the problem of abuse and neglect is expected to grow at an alarming rate.

What is abuse?

Abuse can be physical or psychological (verbal).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines abuse as "the willful infliction of injury, unreasonable confinement, intimidation, or punishment with resulting physical harm or pain or mental anguish or deprivation by an individual, including a caretaker, of goods or services that are necessary to attain or maintain physical, mental, and psychosocial wellbeing."

Arizona Department of Health Services defines abuse as "the intentional infliction of physical harm; injury caused by negligent acts or omissions; unreasonable confinement; sexual abuse or sexual assault; or a pattern of ridiculing or demeaning a resident, making derogatory remarks, verbally harassing or threatening to inflict physical harm on a resident."

At the state level, Ohio defines abuse as "knowingly causing physical harm or recklessly causing serious physical harm to a resident by physical contact with the resident or by the use of physical or chemical restraint, medication or isolation as punishment, for staff convenience, excessively, as a substitute for treatment."

The common elements of abuse noted in these three examples are:

- an action
- committed knowingly
- against another person
- and causing harm to that individual

It is your responsibility to know your state's definition and reporting laws for abuse. Know what they are, understand what they mean. Keep in mind that most states require health care personnel to report *suspected* cases of abuse.

Excessive restraint is one of the most