



Develop Your Skills:

Types and Signs of Elder Abuse and How to Report It

Introduction

As people age they become more vulnerable to being abused. This is because older adults often are dependent on others for their basic needs. Older adults also are often isolated from friends and family for other reason, leaving them more vulnerable. One important right of consumers is the right to be free of abuse and complain about abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, and discomfort. You may notice signs of the abuses outlined below, or the consumer may confide in you, and share instances of abuse or neglect they've experienced, or are experiencing. Consumers can suffer serious physical and emotional damage when they are the victims of abuse and neglect. In many states workers that care for seniors are required to report situations that appear to be cases of abuse or neglect. It is important to know what abuse and neglect are, the signs, and how to report abuse and neglect to a state agency.

This toolkit will review the six kinds of abuse and neglect, provide examples of signs of each, and support you in reported suspected abuse or neglect. It's important to note that the examples listed are not an all inclusive list. If the consumer cites experiencing abuse or neglect, but none of the signs listed below are visible, this does not mean that abuse or neglect has not experienced it.

Types and signs of abuse or neglect

Legislatures in all 50 states have passed some form of elder abuse prevention laws. Laws and definitions of terms vary considerably from one state to another, but broadly defined, abuse may be:

1. Physical abuse. Inflicting physical pain or injury on the consumer.

Examples:

- a. Hitting, slapping, punching, kicking
- b. Hitting with an object
- c. Pushing, tripping, pulling
- d. Twisting, scratching, biting, spitting
- e. Squeezing hard, pinching
- f. Burning, using water that is too hot or too cold, for example for bathing
- g. Chemical: making someone take medications, even if they're supposed to take them, the client cannot be forced to take them if they does not want to. In this case, if appropriate, you should inform a family member.

Signs: Bruises, swelling, scraped skin, scratches, cuts, burns, arm or leg fractured or out of place, a change in the client's way of walking, a change in behavior, inexplicable depression, the consumer is unusually afraid or stops speaking and communicating.



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2. Emotional abuse. Inflicting mental pain, anguish, or distress through verbal and nonverbal acts.
 - a. Shouting or crying
 - b. Threats to punish the person
 - c. Humiliating or making fun of a person
 - d. Intimidating the consumer.

Signs: Sudden behavior changes, fear or unusual suspiciousness, refusing to speak, unexplained depression, no interest in anything, change in activity level.

3. Sexual abuse. Non-consensual sexual contact of any kind.
 - a. The consumer is touched inappropriately, including at bath time.
 - b. If someone has more contact than is necessary for hygiene, or if the consumer is confused
 - c. Any sexual activity that takes place when a person doesn't want it

Signs: Scratches, scrapes, reddening or swelling around the genitals, discomfort when sitting down or walking, abnormal secretion from the penis or vagina, depression, inexplicable signs of fear or nervousness associated with certain persons.

4. Exploitation. Illegal taking, misuse, or concealment of funds, property, or assets of a consumer for someone else's benefit.
 - a. Taking money from a consumer
 - b. Robbery
 - c. Not giving back the correct change after buying things for the consumer

Signs: Missing clothing, missing valuable objects, including money, missing food, the consumer reports incidents of robbery, unpaid bills.

5. Neglect, active and passive. The failure by those responsible to provide food, shelter, health care, or protection for a senior.

Active, intentional withholding basic necessities of life, including care.

- a. Refusing to give the consumer food or water
- b. Not helping with daily activity, when it is obvious that the consumer needs help
- c. Not taking a consumer to the bathroom, when the caregiver knows they need to go
- d. Not changing or cleaning the consumer after they have had an accident
- e. Ignoring a consumer's calls for help

Passive, the failure is unintentional.



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- f. Telling a consumer you'll be back in a bit, and then forgetting to return
- g. Taking a consumer to the bathroom and then forgetting them there
- h. Forgetting to help a consumer with a task they need for daily living
- i. Not paying attention to safety rules
- j. Forgetting to clean a consumer or cleaning them inadequately
- k. Forgetting to feed a consumer

Signs: weight loss, out of the norm odor, tangled hair, is wearing stained or spotted clothing, broken skin, dirty or dangerous conditions in the home environment, unexplained withdrawal or depression, sudden behavior changes, angry or demanding consumer behavior.

- 6. Self-neglect. Self-neglect is the failure of a person to perform essential, self-care tasks and as a result threatens their own health or safety. This refers to situations in which there is no perpetrator and neglect is the result of the older person refusing care.

Signs: Dehydration, malnutrition, untreated or improperly attended medical conditions, and poor personal hygiene, hazardous or unsafe living conditions/arrangements- improper wiring, no indoor plumbing, no heat, no running water, lack of the necessary medical aids- eyeglasses, hearing aids, dentures.

Reporting Abuse

Consumers can suffer serious physical and emotional harm when they are victims of abuse and neglect. The sooner the abuse or neglect can be reported, the sooner it can be stopped. In many states you are required to report abuse or neglect. Remember that your obligation, in many states, is to report abuse, it is never to investigate suspicions or claims made by the consumer.

When the danger is not life threatening or immediate, and you suspect that abuse has occurred or is occurring, you can contact the Adult Protective Services (APS) agency in the state where the consumer resides, information and referral is also available from the national Eldercare Locator, a public service of the U.S. Administration on Aging, that can support you in connecting with the appropriate state agency. Call, toll-free, 1-800-677-1116. The Eldercare Locator is open Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Eastern Time.

When making the call, be ready to give the consumer's name, address, contact information, and details about why you are concerned. You may also be asked a series of questions about the situation. Examples:

- Are there any known medical problems, confusion, memory loss, etc.?



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- What kinds of family or social supports are there?
 - Have you seen or heard incidents of yelling, hitting, or other abusive behavior?

You may also be asked for your name, address, telephone number, etc., but most states will take the report even if you do not identify yourself.

Sources:

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging

Join Us and Find out More!

This tip sheet was developed by the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), an alliance of nannies, care workers and housecleaners working together for rights and dignity. We invite you to join us! NDWA members get special benefits and access to trainings on topics like this one. Visit www.domesticworkers.org to find out more.

This tip sheet was put together by domestic workers and advocates and is not to be understood as direct medical or legal advice. For legal or medical assistance, please consult a healthcare or legal professional.