Abuse & Neglect
What is Abuse?

Elder abuse happens to people of all ethnicities and income levels and can be physical, sexual or emotional in nature. Abuse is the infliction of physical, sexual, or emotional injury or harm including financial exploitation by any person, firm, or corporation. The following are ways elders are abused:

Physical abuse is the use of physical force to cause physical pain or injury and includes any kind of physical battery, such as slapping, pushing, kicking, punching, or injuring with an object or weapon. It also includes deliberate exposure to severe weather, inappropriate use of medication and unnecessary physical restraint.

Sexual abuse is forcing sexual contact without the person’s consent, including touching or sexual talk.

Emotional abuse is causing emotional or psychological pain, and includes isolation, verbal abuse, threats, and humiliation.

Financial abuse or exploitation is stealing or mismanaging the money, property, or belongings of another person. If someone close to an older person forces him or her to sell personal property, or steals money, pension checks, or possessions, this is elder abuse. Theft, fraud, forgery, extortion, and the wrongful use of Power of Attorney can also be elder abuse.

What is Neglect?

Neglect is any lack of action required to meet the needs of an elderly person. It includes inadequate provision of food, clothing, shelter, required medication or other kinds of health and personal care, as well as social companionship. Passive Neglect is the unintentional failure to fulfill a caretaking obligation; infliction of distress without conscious or willful intent. Active neglect includes the intentional failure to fulfill caregiving obligations, infliction of physical or emotional stress or injury, abandonment, denial of food, medication, or personal hygiene.

Other ways elders are abused are overmedicating, confining someone against their will, denying aids such as walkers, eyeglasses or dentures, dirty living conditions, or inadequate heating or air conditioning.
What are the Signs of Elder Abuse & Neglect?

Experts note that there are some signs of abuse, neglect or exploitation which might alert family members, concerned friends or professionals to the possibility of problems. No one should jump to conclusions, but signs and symptoms should be taken seriously. What sometimes seems to be self-neglect often turns out to be elder abuse. Be concerned with:

Personality and behavior changes such as becoming withdrawn, unusually quiet, depressed, or shy; becoming anxious, worried, or easily upset; refusing care from caregivers; or not wanting to be around people/not seeing visitors.

Physical signs may include bruises, marks, welts, rope burns, tufts of hair missing, or broken bones; in a woman, vaginal bleeding or bruising of the genitals or thighs; unreasonable or inconsistent explanations of injuries; or frequent emergency room visits.

Signs of possible neglect are weight loss, malnutrition or dehydration; insufficient clothing, shoes, or basic hygiene items; medications not filled or taken; doctors visits not scheduled or kept; unclean appearance or smell; skin ulcers or sores; or declining health.

Discrepancies between a person’s standard of living and his/her financial assets, or a depletion of assets without adequate explanation. Money or personal items such as eyeglasses, jewelry, hearing aids, or dentures are missing without explanation.

Who Abuses Older People?

In the community, most elder abuse is caused by a family member. This family member is often dependent on the victim for money or a place to live. Abuse sometimes happens because the abuser can no longer handle the stress of looking after the older person. Usually, it happens because of psychological and personal problems.

Who Are The Victims Of Elder Abuse?

Most victims of elder abuse in the community are mentally competent and do not need constant care. But those who have mental or physical disabilities are especially vulnerable. Abuse can happen to any older person, but the greatest physical harm is often done to women. Some older people are the victims of battery by their husband or wife. Isolation and abuse go
hand-in-hand. Most abused older people are isolated from their friends, neighbors, and other family members. Often the abuser will not let anyone visit or talk to the victim.

**Why Is Elder Abuse Seldom Reported?**

Some victims do not report abuse because:

- they are afraid of retaliation,
- they think they will be put in an institution,
- they are ashamed that a family member mistreats them,
- they think that the police and social agencies cannot really help them, or
- they think that no one will believe them.

Sometimes people who believe that someone else is being abused do not report their suspicions because:

- they do not know who to speak to,
- they do not know what can be done,
- they think that no one will believe them, or
- they just do not want to get involved.

No matter where they happen, cases of criminal abuse and serious neglect should be reported to the police.

**Where To Get Help**

If the abused person is in imminent danger, the police should be called. Battery and abuse is as much a crime within families as it is on the street.

**Who can Report Abuse?**

Anyone who suspects someone is being abused, neglected, or exploited can make a report. Certain professionals, however, are mandated by law to report. Any staff member who suspects abuse or neglect of a patient should first report it to his/her supervisor. Depending on the state, Human Services, Adult Protective Services, Health and Welfare, or Department of Aging investigators will help the alleged victim determine the services or interventions needed to stop or alleviate the abuse. The services may include:
community supportive services, such as personal care, respite, or chore services;
home-delivered nutrition services;
financial or legal assistance and protections, such as representative payee, direct deposit, trusts, protective services, civil suit or criminal charges;
counseling for the victim;
referral to other community resources, and;
when needed, guardianship proceedings or nursing home placement.

A competent older person may refuse all services and interventions. No decisions are made about a competent adult without her or her involvement and consent.

**Adult Protective Services**

Adult Protective Services (APS) services are provided on behalf of eligible adults who are unable to:

- manage their own affairs;
- carry out the activities of daily living; or,
- protect themselves from abuse, neglect, or exploitation which may result in harm or a hazard to themselves or others.

The purpose of Adult Protective Services is to:

- promote independence;
- maximize client choice and provide for meaningful client input for preferences;
- keep the adult at home by providing quality alternatives to institutional care; and,
- empower the older adult to attain or maintain optimal self-determination.

If abuse is only suspected, further investigation should be conducted by appropriate persons. Investigation of abuse must be undertaken carefully so that the situation is not aggravated.

Part of the investigation could include talking with the elderly person to determine the accuracy of the suspicions. If abuse is confirmed, it may be that he or she prefers to stay in the situation rather than choose any alternatives that seem available. Giving information and discussing all alternatives can be helpful. Unless the person who is being abused is unable to care for him or herself or make personal decisions because of some disability, he or she has the
right to choose where and how to live.

It may be appropriate to offer assistance to the suspected abuser. Counseling and support services may help alleviate the factors contributing to the abuse. Relief care of the elderly person may assist in reducing stress.