

Health Effects of Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults

Older adults can experience several different kinds of harm from people they rely on or trust. Abuse and neglect in later life can affect an older person's health, happiness and safety.

Abuse can occur to older adults of any culture, ethnic group, social background or religion. Approximately one in 12 or 46,000 older adults in British Columbia experience abuse or neglect at some point. Abuse and neglect of older adults can occur at home, in the community, or in institutional settings. It can take many forms including physical, emotional, financial, sexual, spiritual or social. Some forms of abuse and neglect violate the older adult's basic rights, and several types are crimes.

Why does abuse and neglect happen?

Some people learn to use violence and control in their relationships with other people. Many people in society have negative beliefs about older people or may not understand them. Others do not treat older adults with respect. This may increase the risk of abuse or may be the excuse or reason people use for their abusive behaviour.

Some people experience personal problems or stresses that increase their risk of behaving in harmful ways towards others. Living together with older adults or other factors, such as poverty, may create family tensions and lead to abuse or neglect. In some cases, family pride can keep abuse hidden. Caring communities can help protect people from abuse.

Signs of abuse and neglect

The most obvious signs of physical abuse are falls, unexplained bruises, broken bones, and burns. An older adult who experiences abuse may also have head injuries or injuries to the mouth that need dental care and attention. An older adult who is neglected may be severely dehydrated or suffering from malnutrition.

Other health effects of abuse or neglect are less obvious and may include sleeping difficulties, stomach problems, or breathing problems. Many of the signs of abuse and neglect may be hidden. Some of the signs of abuse, such as frequent falls or confusion, may be mistaken as a part of aging. Some signs of abuse or neglect may look like other health conditions common in later life. People may not recognize or identify these as abuse.

Health effects do not always show up the same way for everyone. Older adults who experience abuse or neglect may have difficulty sleeping, lose interest in life, change their habits, such as eating, drinking or medications, or have suicidal thoughts.

What are the health effects of abuse and neglect on older adults?

Abuse and neglect can have long-term effects on the health and well-being of older adults. This often depends on emotional support and the response of family and friends. It also depends on whether the individual feels some control of their situation.

In general, older adults have less physical strength and are less able to defend themselves from physical abuse. Older bones break more easily and take longer to heal. These injuries can lead to serious harm or death in older adults. For example, physical abuse may cause a hip fracture, and the injured adult would need surgery and community supports.

Living with abuse and neglect can significantly increase the person's chances of becoming ill or dying early. The stress of living with abuse or neglect may also make other health problems worse.

Many older adults who experience financial abuse also face emotional abuse. This can lead to ongoing distress and financial strain in the older person's life. If the abuser controls the older adult's money, the older adult may have fewer resources to take care of their own health with proper housing, good nutrition and healthy activities.

Emotional effects of abuse and neglect

Individuals who cause abuse and/or neglect to older adults often threaten, harass, or intimidate them. They may cause fears in older adults by threatening to not let them see their grandchildren or threatening to leave them alone or place them in a residential care facility.

Older adults often experience worry, depression, or anxiety as a result of abuse and neglect. Some people may mistake these as signs of memory loss or illness, when really they are the effects of stress or worry. An older adult may feel shame, guilt, or embarrassment that someone in the family or someone close has harmed them. An older adult who feels abused or neglected usually loses trust in the person who causes the harm. Sometimes when older adults tell someone about the abuse, the person hearing it might act as if they do not believe them. This can cause further harm to the person's feelings.

Some older adults who have experienced abuse earlier or throughout their lives may use alcohol or prescription drugs to help with sleep or anxiety. It is their way of coping with the emotional and physical hurt. Some may develop a dependency on alcohol or medications.

Today, older adults are more willing to seek counselling or the support of a group. This may help them with the emotional and other effects of abuse or neglect. They may find this support very helpful for regaining their self-esteem and self-confidence.

You can help

Many of the emotional effects of abuse and neglect can be overcome with time and help. 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;
- Take time and listen non-judgmentally to the older adult;
- Reassure them that they did not deserve the abuse, and they are not responsible for the behaviour of the individual who caused the harm;
- Encourage the older adult to ask a professional for confidential help; and
- Be careful not to take sides with the person who caused the harm.

Trained persons can help an older adult assess his or her own personal safety, and help the person develop a safety plan. A person's risk can change quickly over time. 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. This can help prevent the situation from becoming worse.

If you discover a crime or dangerous situation is occurring to an older adult, call the police or 911 immediately. If you are not sure if an older person is being abused or neglected and you want to talk to a health professional, you can call the BC NurseLine 24 hours a day for information and advice.

For resources available in your community, contact the **Home and Community Care Office** in your local health authority, or contact the **B.C. Coalition to Eliminate Abuse of Seniors** at 604-437-1940 or at www.bcceas.ca.

For more information, see other topics in the [BC HealthFiles Elder Abuse Prevention Series](#).



For more BC HealthFile topics visit www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm, or visit your local public health unit.

Call the BC NurseLine to speak to a registered nurse, available 24-hours every day:

- In Greater Vancouver, call 604-215-4700
- In BC, call toll-free 1-866-215-4700
- Deaf and hearing-impaired, call 1-866-889-4700
- Pharmacist available 5pm to 9am every day
- Translation services in over 130 languages upon request.

Visit BC HealthGuide OnLine – a world of health information you can trust at www.bchealthguide.org