

Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults: Understanding Gender Differences

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 adult's health, happiness and safety.

Approximately one in 12 or 46,000 older adults in British Columbia will experience abuse or neglect in later life. Abuse 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.

Who is abused? Who is the abuser?

Older women are more likely to be victims of family violence than older men. Two out of every three victims of abuse in later life are women.

Both men and women can be abusive or neglectful. However, in approximately two thirds of the abuse cases that come to the attention of community agencies, the abusers are men. Eighty per cent of those accused of violently harming an older family member are men.

In most cases, older women usually experience abuse or neglect from their spouse, partner or her adult children.

For older men, the abuse or neglect is most likely to come from his adult children or close friends.

Although older adults may experience harm from strangers, this is much less common.

When might the abuse begin?

Women are more likely than men to experience abuse in their younger years that may continue into later life. The effects of many years of abuse can be hard on a person's health.

For many older men, their first experience with abuse or neglect may occur in later life. It may begin after the man has developed a disabling condition and is relying on others for help.

Differences among women and men

Abuse hurts both older men and older women. However, they may face different risks and may be affected in different ways.

- Older women are more likely than older men to have experienced many years of emotional, physical or sexual abuse.
- On average, a woman tends to be smaller than a man, and she may have less ability to defend herself from physical abuse.
- Older women are more likely than older men to have disabling conditions, be widowed or living alone.
- Older women are much more likely than older men to live in a residential care facility, where abuse may occur from staff, family or volunteers.

Because an older woman may have fewer resources, she may be reluctant to leave the abusive relationship.

Similarities among women and men

Abuse and neglect significantly affect older adults emotionally and physically. Both older women and older men may feel shocked, embarrassed, guilty, or ashamed that someone they trust is hurting or taking advantage of them.

A woman may be concerned about how it reflects on her as a mother or grandmother. A man experiencing abuse may hesitate telling anyone if he feels it will reflect badly on him.

Money, gender and abuse

Financial abuse is the most common form of abuse that older adults are likely to face. It may affect older women and older men in important ways.

- Older women are more likely to depend on others to help them with financial matters.
- Some older women have little financial experience and may not have had a bank account.
- Older men are more likely to have regular income, such as a pension.

Women may often have fewer financial resources to begin with and they tend to live longer than older men do. This means that if women lose income or assets through financial abuse, it will probably affect them significantly and longer.

Seeking help

In helping an older person who is experiencing abuse or neglect, it is important to understand their situation and how they feel. It is important to understand why abused older adults stay or "put up with abuse". Be aware of any stereotypes or assumptions you may have about older adults, families, or diverse cultures. Recognize circumstances that may contribute to older adults not seeking the help they need.

- Often older adults may not realize there are local resources available for them. Some older adults may feel they must help and protect their spouse or grown children, even if they are abusive. They may not think about the consequences or effects on themselves.
- Many older women who experience abuse are concerned they will be worse off financially if they leave their spouse or partner.
- In spousal abuse, family members may discourage the parent from taking action. They may be protective of the other parent, or may not want to take sides.
- Some older women and men depend on others, including people from whom they may experience abuse, for assistance with daily living. This can have a major impact on the older person's decision about whether to leave, or not, and how to seek help.

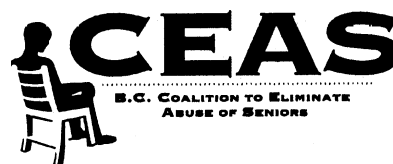
- An older person's community, culture and perspective on life can also affect how they react to the abuse. In many cultures, people expect families to keep problems private or hidden. Older immigrants may face language barriers to seeking help. They may also have no pension or other resources of their own, and they may have little family support.

For more information

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.bceas.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