

Preventing Abuse and Neglect in Later Life

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

Abuse is not limited to older adults of any particular 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 of older adults can occur at home, in the community or in institutional settings. Those who abuse are most often family members (the person's spouse or children), but they can also include friends, landlords and staff.

What types of abuse or neglect can older adults experience?

Abuse and neglect can take many forms, including physical, emotional, financial, sexual, spiritual or social. Some types of abuse and neglect violate the older adult's basic rights and several types are crimes.

- **Physical abuse** includes violence or rough treatment, even if it does not leave an injury. A push that might not hurt a younger person can be very harmful to an older adult.
- **Emotional abuse** includes name calling, intimidation, threats or any treatment that offends an older person's sense of dignity and self-worth. Emotional abuse is often a way that people attempt to control an older person.
- **Financial abuse** is the most common form of abuse that older adults face. Examples of financial abuse include pressuring an older adult with requests for money; family or other people using an older adult's property or money without the person's full knowledge and consent or the improper use of power of attorney.

- **Sexual abuse** is when a person pressures an older adult for intimacy or sexually harasses or sexually assaults them. Sexual abuse can also include sexual comments or jokes, touching or leering. People of any age can experience sexual abuse, and it happens more often to older women than older men.
- **Violations of rights** means ignoring older adults' rights to privacy, information or community supports. In some cases, rules or policies may violate an older adult's rights.
- **Neglect** refers to situations where a person has a duty to provide care or assistance to an older adult, but does not. For example, the caregiver might stop paying the bills or providing food, medication or other forms of assistance that the older adult needs. Some people may do this on purpose. Others simply do not know how to help.

Why does abuse 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 people use for their abusive behaviour.

Some people experience personal problems or stresses that may increase their risk of harming or neglecting others. Living together with older adults or poverty may create family tensions and may lead to abuse or neglect. In some cases, family pride can keep abuse hidden, but caring communities can also help protect people from abuse and neglect. It does not matter who the abuser is, or what the person's reason is, no one deserves to be abused or mistreated.

Abuse and neglect hurt

When abuse or neglect happens to an older adult, it often affects the person's physical and emotional health. Abused older adults lose trust and sometimes begin to question their own judgment and decision making. They can feel depressed and even suicidal. Abusers can also feel mixed emotions about their harmful behaviour. Abuse and neglect have significant impacts on families and communities.

Abuse and neglect can be prevented

Abuse or neglect rarely stops by itself. It takes many people working together to make it stop. There is no law in British Columbia that requires people to report abuse and neglect of older adults. However, you can help an abused or neglected senior to get help and prevent the situation from getting worse.

- Recognize abuse and neglect and speak up about it.
- Listen to the older person in a non-judgmental manner.
- Respect the person's choices.
- Know where to call to get information.

If you are a service provider working with older adults:

- help older adults and families learn more about their rights and responsibilities;
- help older adults build or regain their confidence and skills;
- help to reduce the person's social isolation; and
- have appropriate resources in place to help older adults and families.

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.bcceas.ca

The staff of your local **Home and Community Care Office** has a responsibility to investigate more serious reports of suspected abuse or neglect of vulnerable adults. The **Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee** may be able to help if the older adult is not mentally capable of making decisions or judging their own ability to live at risk.

For information on legal services, including how to access legal aid and advice, contact the **Legal Services Society of BC LawLINE** at 604-408-2172 or 1-866-577-2525 (outside of Greater Vancouver) or at www.lss.bc.ca.

Victim Link also provides information for victims of family and sexual violence and crime. You can call 1-800-563-0808 any time and from anywhere in British Columbia. Victim Link offers multi-language services and services for people who are deaf or hearing impaired.

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