



Pick Your Path to Health

Violence Against the Elderly

It takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a caring community to look out for the elderly among us, especially when it comes to keeping seniors safe from abuse.

One older adult in four experiences some kind of abuse or neglect, according to the American Medical Association. And more than two-thirds of those who abuse the elderly are family members of the victims, typically serving as their caregivers. The abuse can range from injuring the person physically to taking advantage of him or her financially.

"We are only looking at the tip of the iceberg with reported cases of elder abuse or neglect," says Carol Downs of the National Center on Elder Abuse in Washington, D.C. "It is difficult to know the exact number of elders abused or neglected each year." Some experts estimate that only one out of 14 domestic elder abuse incidents comes to the attention of authorities.

So be aware! Those who come into contact with older adults can often spot the abuse and help save them from harm. Among the signs of various types of abuse are open wounds, bruises, malnutrition, dehydration, depression and fearfulness (especially in the presence of the caregiver), misuse or stealing of an older person's money or possessions, and unsanitary or unclean living conditions.

Abuse and neglect is not only inflicted by others, but the elderly also can harm themselves. In 2000, self-neglect accounted for most of the reported cases of abuse, followed by physical abuse, Downs says. Self-neglect represents behaviors of an elderly person that threaten his or her own health or safety.

Family members must be vigilant to spot self-neglect or abuse even if your loved one is at a supposedly safe nursing home. If elderly family members refuse any outside help, regular visits from family can help keep them safe by monitoring how they are caring for themselves and offering help where needed. For example, if an elderly relative is not eating appropriately, offer to come along on a grocery-shopping trip and make sure enough healthy choices make it into the shopping cart. Make this trip to the supermarket a regular date if you can.

"If you sense something is wrong, it often is," Downs says. Concerned individuals should first talk to the elder and offer support and information about where they might seek help. If this is not possible, the concerned party should know whom to contact, Downs says. That would include the state Adult Protective Services agency or the area Agency on Aging. Both are listed in the local telephone directory. If you know the address and ZIP code of the older person being abused, the Eldercare Locator (1-800-677-1116) can refer you to the appropriate agency in the area to report the suspected abuse. There is also the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE).

AARP, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that represents more than 34 million Americans age 50 and older, offers these tips to prevent elderly abuse:

If you are an older adult...

- Maintain social contacts; increase network of friends
- Develop a buddy system with a friend outside the home
- Ask friends to visit you at home
- Participate in social and community activities
- Get legal advice concerning arrangements you can make for future disability (such as powers-of-attorney)
- Arrange to have your social security check or pension deposited directly into your bank account
- Don't sign a document unless someone you trust has reviewed it

If you are a family member serving as a caregiver to an older adult...

- Maintain close ties with aging relatives and friends
- Find sources of help and use them
- Anticipate potential incapacitation and make plans based on discussion of the elder's wishes
- Don't offer personal home care unless you thoroughly understand the demands and can meet the responsibility and costs involved
Don't ignore your limitations and overextend yourself.

For more information about elder abuse, contact:

- Administration on Aging, (202) 619-7501; www.aoa.gov.
- National Center on Elder Abuse, (202) 898-2586;
www.elderabusecenter.org
- AARP, 1-800-424-3410; www.aarp.org

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to subscribe to the listserv to receive tips on improving your health, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at www.4woman.gov. This article was developed through a partnership between the Office on Women's Health and the Wellness Warriors Network.