

Preventing Abuse and Neglect

(3 credits)

After completing this section you should be able to:

1. Define abuse and neglect and identify related terms
2. Describe signs of abuse and neglect
3. Describe persons who are most vulnerable to abuse or neglect by caregivers
4. Identify factors that contribute to increased stress among caregivers
5. Describe the proper response to suspected abuse and neglect
6. List ways that caregivers can help prevent or stop abuse and neglect

1. Define abuse and neglect and identify related terms

Federal law mandates that residents in long-term care facilities have “the right to be free from verbal, sexual, physical, and mental abuse, corporal punishment, and involuntary seclusion.” The same should be true for anyone who is under the care and supervision of the healthcare system. This means that facilities and agencies must protect their residents and clients from abuse by anyone, including:

- Caregivers
- Other residents/clients
- Family members
- Visitors
- Doctors

Facilities must also have written policies and procedures to prevent abuse and neglect, and must not employ anyone who is likely to put residents and clients at risk. By law, your employer must perform a criminal background check. This law is intended to protect residents and clients.

Healthcare workers and their employers can be sued for abuse and neglect. It is

very important to understand what these two terms mean.

Abuse is the act of purposely causing physical, mental, or emotional pain or injury to someone in your care. **Neglect** means harming the person in your care either physically, mentally, or emotionally by failing to provide needed care. To put it more simply: Abuse is something you DO; neglect is something you do NOT DO.

There are different types of abuse and neglect, including the following:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Psychological abuse
- Financial abuse
- Active neglect
- Passive neglect
- Self-abuse or self-neglect

Physical abuse refers to any treatment, intentional or unintentional, that causes harm to a person’s body. This includes slapping, bruising, cutting, burning, physically restraining, pushing, shoving, or even rough handling of another person.

Sexual abuse is forcing a person to perform or participate in sexual acts against his or her will.

Psychological or mental abuse is emotionally harming a person by threatening, demeaning, frightening, humiliating, intimidating, isolating, insulting, treating him or her as a child, or by using verbal aggression.

Financial abuse is stealing, exploiting, or improperly using the money, property, or other assets of another person.

Active neglect means purposely harming a person physically, mentally, or emotionally by failing to provide needed care. Examples include deliberately leaving a bedridden person alone for lengthy periods, ignoring the person, or willfully denying the person food, medication, dentures, or eyeglasses.

Passive neglect is unintentionally harming a person physically, mentally, or emotionally by failing to provide needed care. The caregiver may not know how to properly care for the person, or may not understand the person's needs.

Self-abuse or -neglect is any of the activities mentioned above committed by the person himself.

2. Describe signs of abuse and neglect

If you ever see or suspect that another caregiver or a family member is abusing a person, report this immediately to your supervisor. Reporting abuse is not an option—it's the law.

The following are "suspicious" injuries that should be reported:

- Poisoning or traumatic injury (to toddlers, dependent adults)

- Human teeth marks
- Belt buckle or strap marks
- Old and new bruises, contusions and welts
- Bruises, bleeding, or discharge from the vaginal area
- Fractures, dislocation
- Burns of unusual shape and in unusual locations; cigarette burns
- Scalding burns
- Scratches and puncture wounds
- Scalp tenderness and patches of missing hair
- Swelling in the face, broken teeth, nasal discharge

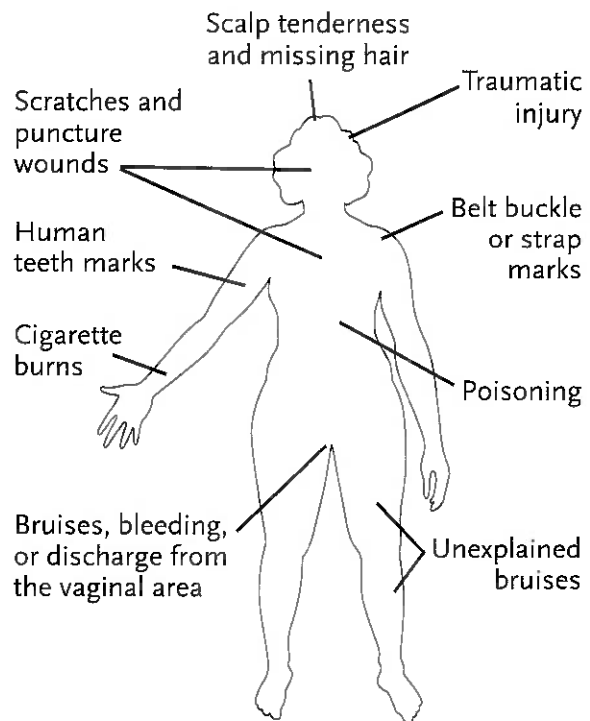


Fig. 5-1. Suspicious injuries must be reported.

Signs that could indicate abuse or self-abuse include:

- Yelling obscenities
- Fear, vigilance, apprehension; afraid of being alone
- Poor self-control
- Constant pain

- Threats to hurt others
- Withdrawal or apathy
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Agitation or anxiety, signs of stress
- Low self-esteem
- Mood changes, confusion, disorientation
- Private conversations not allowed, or a family member/caregiver is present during all conversations

Signs that could indicate neglect or self-neglect include:

- Pressure sores
- Body not clean
- Body lice
- Clothing does not fit
- Refuses to use money for self
- Refuses care
- Needs hearing aid, glasses, etc.
- Weight loss
- Poor appetite
- Dehydration

Because you spend so much time with the person to whom you are giving care, you will be in an excellent position to observe and report abuse or neglect. You have an ethical and legal responsibility to observe for signs of abuse and report suspected cases to a supervisor.

3. Describe persons who are most vulnerable to abuse or neglect by caregivers

Some people are more vulnerable to adult abuse or neglect than others. They include the following:

- Elderly
- Physically ill or disabled
- Developmentally disabled
- Mentally ill or disabled
- People with communication problems, such as hearing, speech, and vision problems

All of these people have a few things in common that make them so vulnerable. They are often unable to stand up for themselves or report abuse or neglect to others. They may not even understand that they have rights. Often these people can be much more demanding to care for, which increases the stress that caregivers have to deal with. Caregivers may not have been properly trained to care for these particular people, and they may not understand why these people behave the way they do. Caregivers may also be overworked, tired, stressed, and unappreciated on top of caring for someone who requires so much time and energy.



Fig. 5-2. Elderly people who are abused may be unable to stand up for themselves or to report abuse or neglect. They may not understand their rights.

These are the people who most need your help in protecting themselves. They may not be able to speak for themselves, but the signs of abuse and neglect may speak volumes for them, if you just know how to recognize these signs.

4. Identify factors that contribute to increased stress among caregivers

Caregivers can be spouses, parents, adult children, siblings, relatives, friends, neighbors, and healthcare professionals.

The following situations can cause stress for caregivers:

- Older adults are becoming more dependent.
- Older adults are living much longer.
- The cost of caring for the elderly is increasing.
- Many family caregivers also work outside the home.
- Two-career families
- Single parent caregivers
- Unemployment
- Decrease or lack of financial resources
- No support groups or community resources available
- Lack of close family ties
- Spousal roles reversed
- Caregivers experiencing fatigue
- Mental and emotional disorders among dependent elderly
- Decreased mental abilities of elderly
- Older adult has increasing difficulty with self-care.
- Illness of either caregivers or dependent elderly
- Vision/hearing impairments for both caregivers and dependent elderly
- History of alcohol and drug abuse for either caregivers or dependent elderly
- High divorce rates among family caregivers
- Sleep interruptions and loss of sleep
- Decreasing friends
- Loss of family time

The following factors contribute to adult/elderly abuse (Fig. 5-3):

- Loneliness
- Isolation
- Poor communication skills
- Fear of nursing homes
- Ageism
- Violence as a way of life

- Increasing anger and resentment, usually unexpressed
- Retaliation for past child abuse

Many older people do not have relatives who are caring enough or close enough to help them. They need the services provided by trained healthcare professionals:

- Counseling
- Education for the family
- Respite care
- Adult day care
- Delivered meals
- Support groups

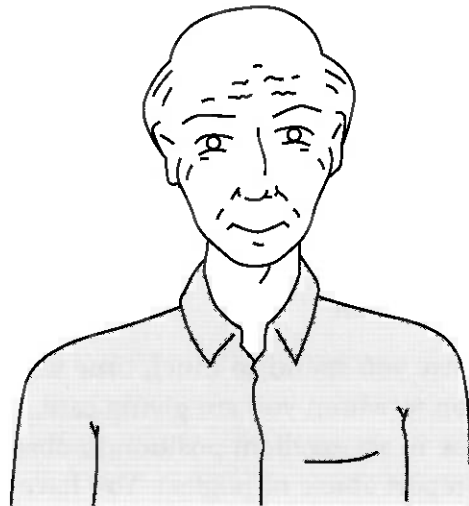


Fig. 5-3. An elderly person who is lonely or isolated is at a higher risk for abuse.

When the abusive situation is mild, caregivers can often turn their behavior around by relieving stress and getting help with caregiving.

Healthcare professionals are in a perfect position to offer this much-needed stress relief.

The following are ways healthcare workers can relieve their own stress:

- Recognize your feelings of stress
- Understand that some clients and residents can be very angering
- Leave the situation as soon as possible

- Talk to your supervisor about your own stress
- Ask for help from other caregivers

Be realistic about your abilities and limits. No matter how frustrating a person or situation is, never take your stress or frustration out on someone in your care!

Unfortunately, caregivers are much more likely to abuse or neglect someone who is difficult to manage. Recognize these feelings and seek help!

5. Describe the proper response to suspected abuse and neglect

You have the following responsibilities concerning abuse and neglect:

1. Know the signs of abuse and neglect.
2. Be on the alert for signs of abuse and neglect.
3. Report to your supervisor if you suspect abuse or neglect. (Follow the proper procedures outlined by your agency or facility.)
4. Keep things confidential!

You are only responsible for reporting suspected abuse and neglect. You should not investigate the situation. Follow the proper channels for reporting suspected abuse and neglect. This protects you, your agency or facility, and the victim.

6. List ways that caregivers can help prevent or stop abuse and neglect

To help maintain independence and prevent abuse from ever happening, caregivers should encourage the persons in their care to do the following (Fig. 5-4):

- Keep a network of friends.

- Participate in community activities as long as possible.
- Make and keep personal care appointments such as dentist and hairdresser.
- Have a “Buddy System” with a friend outside of the family and communicate weekly.
- Invite guests often.
- Be neat and organized.
- Maintain own telephone.
- Protect valuables—do not leave them lying around.
- Do not give up financial control if at all possible.
- Know the abuse hotline number.



Fig. 5-4. Communicating often with friends can help prevent abuse and neglect.

