

Do you know the risk factors for elder abuse?

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Elder abuse is commonly considered a hidden problem because it can happen in many different forms and is not always visible. Elder abuse often goes unreported for various reasons, including a fear of retaliation by an abuser, worry about the impact on their family or home life, or simply because the person does not realize that what they are experiencing may be abuse.



Elder abuse is the mistreatment of an elderly person by someone that the person relies on for care, assistance or interaction¹. Defined by the World Health Organization, elder abuse is “*a single, or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person.*”

People with dementia are particularly vulnerable to abuse by people who are close to them, and can take place in both residential settings and home environments. People with dementia are at a much higher risk of being taken advantage of by strangers due to their cognitive difficulties, loss of capacity, communication challenges and their increasing dependence on their caregivers. In fact, they are at an increased risk of being affected by different forms of abuse including verbal, physical, financial and psychological abuse. Neglect is also considered a form of abuse that affects many individuals living with dementia.



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The caregiver may also experience abuse by the person with dementia, either due to lifelong habits or due to the brain changes and behavioural symptoms caused by the disease process in the person they are caring for.

Canadian research reveals that elder abuse affects between 4% and 10% of older adults in Canada². Only one in five incidents of elder abuse actually comes to the attention of those who can help. If we look at the prevalence of abuse of older adults with dementia, we know individuals affected range between 5.4% (Pavez et al. (1992)) and 11.9 % (Coyne et al. (1993)).

There are several risk factors that affect both persons with dementia and caregivers:

- The changes resulting from confusion and dementia
- The stress of care, mental and physical health problems or disabilities can affect the coping abilities of both persons with dementia and their caregivers.
- Substance abuse
- Social and geographical isolation
- The person's history (being abusive or having experienced abuse)
- A history of domestic violence in the home
- Episodes of verbal or physical behaviour exchanges between the person with dementia and caregiver
- Dependency (living arrangements, financially, and emotionally)
- Depression

In many cases, elder abuse, mistreatment or neglect is not intentional. Caregivers and persons with dementia may find themselves pushed beyond their capabilities and they may not mean to be verbally or physically abusive. Caregivers may not mean to neglect the person they are caring for or to ignore their needs.

Increased understanding of dementia, the symptoms that occur and the changes that can be expected can be helpful. It is important to make sure that caregivers have regular breaks or respite/caregiver relief opportunities. It is helpful for



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caregivers to get the support they need to help them cope with stress related to the caregiving role and this support can be derived from a number of supportive resources such as a counsellor, a faith-based leader or support through your local Alzheimer Society services.

To know how to respond to a situation of abuse, please visit:

<http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/Living-with-dementia/Day-to-day-living/Safety/Elder-abuse> .

World Elder Abuse Day is June 15!



Find out more here: <http://weaad.elderabuseontario.com/what-is-weaad/>

For more information on Elder Abuse, visit: <http://www.elderabuseontario.com/>

Sources:

1. Abuse Prevention of Older Adults Network: <http://www.apoan.org/>
2. Public Health Agency Canada
Alzheimer Society of Canada: <http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/Living-with-dementia/Day-to-day-living/Safety/Elder-abuse>
Elder Abuse Ontario: <http://www.elderabuseontario.com/>



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