

Preventing Elder Abuse in Senior Care Organizations

Question

What strategies and best practices can senior care facilities and long-term care facilities implement to address elder abuse? How can staff determine whether a resident is suffering from abuse?

Answer

Physical and mental impairments and limitations often ensue as people age, making them more vulnerable to physical and emotional abuse. Elder abuse occurs both in senior care facilities and in private homes, and many incidences of abuse may go unnoticed or unreported.¹

According to the National Council on Aging, 10 percent of Americans aged 60 or older have experienced some form of elder abuse. Some estimates suggest that as many as 5 million elderly people are abused each year — and these individuals have a 300 percent higher risk of death when compared to those who have not been abused.²

Although most elder abuse victims are women, men also are abused. Likely targets are elderly people who have no family or friends nearby or those who have disabilities, memory problems, or dementia.³

Abuse comes in many forms, including physical, emotional/psychological, sexual, and financial. Other types of abuse include neglect, exploitation, abandonment, and healthcare fraud. Signs of abuse may manifest in various ways, such as:

- Trouble sleeping
- Persistent physical pain and soreness
- Depression or confusion

- Weight loss for no reason
- Sudden unexplained hair loss
- Signs of trauma, such as rocking back and forth
- Agitation or violence
- Withdrawn behavior and lack of participation in activities
- Unexplained broken bones, burns, abrasions, scars, welts, wounds, and injuries
- An ungroomed and messy personal appearance (e.g., unwashed hair or dirty clothes)
- Frequent infections
- Signs of dehydration or malnourishment
- Increased susceptibility to new illnesses
- Exacerbation of preexisting health conditions
- Refusal to eat or take medications⁴

To reduce the risk of elder abuse, senior care facility leaders and employees can implement workforce, environmental, enforcement, and other strategies to protect elderly residents. For example:

- Create and enforce a facility policy that clearly defines and prohibits resident mistreatment and specifies the steps involved in recognizing, monitoring, and managing any elder abuse.
- Screen prospective employees for any criminal background (both state and federal), sexual offenses, any cited behavioral health incidents, history of substance abuse and domestic violence, negative perceptions about caring for elderly people, reactions to abusive residents, and ability to manage anger and stress.
- Educate residents and family members/significant others on how to recognize the signs of elder abuse, and encourage them to report any concerns to facility leaders.
- Require staff members to undergo training on recognizing the signs of, responding to, and dealing with the aftermath of elder abuse.

- Ensure that all staff members, including medical staff members, are trained in proper ways to document abuse or the suspicion of abuse.
- Make staff aware of the mandatory requirements for reporting elder abuse, appropriate processes for reporting, and consequences for failing to report abuse. Strictly enforce these policies.
- Educate staff members in interpersonal caregiver skills, management of difficult resident care situations, problem-solving, cultural issues that may affect staff–resident relationships, conflict resolution, stress-reduction techniques, and dementia care strategies.
- Enhance healthcare employees’ work environment through adequate staffing, increased communication between direct care and administrative staff, additional time to nurture relationships between staff members and residents, competitive salaries, and advancement opportunities.
- Work with facility leadership to establish a culture of safety that promotes high-quality care. Involve providers and staff members in quality improvement discussions and initiatives.
- Implement support groups to help nurses and nursing aides discuss issues, work toward solutions, and foster emotional support.
- Comply with federal requirements regarding the employment of skilled nursing staff and nurse aides.
- Facilitate and encourage resident councils at the facility. Actively solicit resident/family input on issues related to abuse, communication, relationship-building, and conflict resolution.
- Participate in community collaborations with law enforcement, adult protective services, home and community care services, regulatory organizations, and others to educate the public and professionals.

Resource

For more information and resources, see MedPro’s [Risk Resources: Elder Abuse](#).

Endnotes

¹ National Council on Aging. (2021, February 23). *Get the facts on elder abuse*. Retrieved from www.ncoa.org/public-policy-action/elder-justice/elder-abuse-facts/

² Ibid.

³ National Institute on Aging. (2020, July 29). *Elder abuse*. Retrieved from www.nia.nih.gov/health/elder-abuse

⁴ National Institute on Aging. (n.d.). *Spotting the signs of elder abuse*. Retrieved from www.nia.nih.gov/health/infographics/spotting-signs-elder-abuse; National Center on Elder Abuse. (n.d.). Research, statistics, and data. Retrieved from <https://ncea.acl.gov/What-We-Do/Research/Statistics-and-Data.aspx>

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