Understanding Elder Abuse

Elder abuse includes several types of violence that occur among those ages 60 and older. The violence usually occurs at the hands of a caregiver or a person the elder trusts. Six frequently recognized types of elder abuse include:

- **Physical**—This occurs when an elder is injured as a result of hitting, kicking, pushing, slapping, burning, or other show of force.

- **Sexual**—This involves forcing an elder to take part in a sexual act when the elder does not or cannot consent.

- **Emotional**—This refers to behaviors that harm an elder's self-worth or emotional well being. Examples include name calling, scaring, embarrassing, destroying property, or not letting the elder see friends and family.

- **Neglect**—This is the failure to meet an elder's basic needs. These needs include food, housing, clothing, and medical care.

- **Abandonment**—This happens when a caregiver leaves an elder alone and no longer provides care for him or her.

- **Financial**—This is illegally misusing an elder's money, property, or assets.

Why is elder abuse a public health problem?

Elder abuse is a serious problem in the United States. There is a lack of data but what we do know is that:

- In 2008, one in 10 elders reported emotional, physical, or sexual mistreatment or potential neglect in the past year.[1]

Many cases are not reported because elders are afraid to tell police, friends, or family about the violence. Victims have to decide: tell someone they are being hurt or continue being abused by someone they depend upon or care for deeply.

How does elder abuse affect health?

Elder abuse can have several physical and emotional effects on an elder.

Many victims suffer physical injuries. Some are minor like cuts, scratches, bruises, and welts. Others are more serious and can cause lasting disabilities. These include head injuries, broken bones, constant physical pain, and soreness. Physical injuries can also lead to premature death and make existing health problems worse.[2, 3, 4, 5]

Elder abuse can have emotional effects as well. Victims are often fearful and anxious. They may have problems with trust and be wary around others. [2]

Who is at risk for elder abuse?

Several factors can increase the risk that someone will hurt an elder. However, having these risk factors does not always mean violence will occur.

Some of the risk factors for hurting an elder include:

- Using drugs or alcohol, especially drinking heavily
- High levels of stress and low or ineffective coping resources
- Lack of social support
- High emotional or financial dependence on the elder
- Lack of training in taking care of elders
- Depression

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How can we prevent elder abuse?

The goal is to stop elder abuse before it starts. While not much research has been done, there are several things we can do to prevent it:

- Listen to elders and their caregivers
- Report abuse or suspected abuse to Adult Protective Services
- Educate oneself and others about how to recognize and report elder abuse
- Learn how the signs of elder abuse differ from the normal aging process

If you take care of an elder here are some things you can do to prevent violence:

- Get help from friends, family, or local relief care groups
- Take a break— if only for a couple of hours
- Involve more people than just family in financial matters
- Find an adult day care program
- Seek counseling or other support if you are feeling depressed
- If you are having problems with drug or alcohol abuse, get help [6]

How does CDC approach elder abuse prevention?

CDC uses a 4-step approach to address public health problems like elder abuse.

Step 1: Define the problem
Before we can prevent elder abuse, we need to know how big the problem is, where it is, and whom it affects. CDC learns about a problem by gathering and studying data. These data are critical because they help decision makers send resources where they are needed most.

Step 2: Identify risk and protective factors
It is not enough to know that elder abuse is affecting a certain group in a certain area. We also need to know why. CDC conducts and supports research to answer this question. We can then develop programs to reduce or get rid of risk factors.

Step 3: Develop and test prevention strategies
Using information gathered in research, CDC develops and evaluates strategies to prevent violence.

Step 4: Ensure widespread adoption
In this final step, CDC shares the best prevention strategies. CDC may also provide funding or technical help so communities can adopt these strategies.

Where can I learn more?

Elder Abuse Helplines and Hotlines
Call 1-800-677-1116
Always dial 911 or local police during emergencies.

National Center on Elder Abuse
www.ncea.aoa.gov

National Institute on Aging
www.nia.nih.gov

National Institute of Justice
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/crime/elder-abuse/welcome.htm

For more information on elder abuse, visit www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention.

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