Elder Abuse

The Health Sector Role in Prevention and Response

1 in 6 older adults worldwide have been abused in the past year.

Elder abuse is a hidden problem.
What is **elder abuse**?

It’s the abuse and neglect of older people. It takes many forms.

**Physical abuse**
- Hitting, pushing, kicking
- Inappropriate use of drugs or restraints

**Psychological or emotional abuse**
- Insults, threats, humiliation, controlling behavior, confinement and isolation

**Sexual abuse**
- Sexual contact without consent

**Financial exploitation**
- Misusing or stealing a person’s money or assets

**Neglect or abandonment**
- Not providing food, housing, or medical care

Elder abuse can happen just once or repeatedly.

People who commit elder abuse are often in a position of trust.

*Family members*  *Health care workers*
Elder abuse is **common**.

Elder abuse can happen **at home**.
- 90% of all abusers are family members.
- Most abusers are adult children, spouses and partners.

Elder abuse can also happen **in institutions**.
- Nursing homes
- Long-term care facilities

Data about elder abuse in nursing homes and other long-term facilities are scarce. **But a review of available data suggests that rates are high.**

Many older people in institutions report that they have been abused:
- 33% report psychological abuse
- 14% report physical abuse
- 14% report financial abuse
- 12% report neglect
- 2% report sexual abuse

**But only 4% of elder abuse is reported. Why?**

Older people may:
- Fear retaliation
- Worry about getting the abuser in trouble
- Be mentally incapable
- Feel ashamed or embarrassed

In many countries, older people have nowhere to turn for help — because there are limited systems in place to address elder abuse.
Elder abuse has **devastating consequences.**

**It has physical effects.**
- Injuries
- Lasting disability
- Worsened health conditions

**It has psychological effects.**
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Loss of dignity, trust, and hope

One study from the United States tracked older people over 13 years and found:

**Victims of elder abuse were twice as likely to die** compared to older people who did not report abuse.

**Elder abuse has high costs.**

In the United States:

**US$5.3 billion** each year in medical costs from violent injuries to older people
What are the risk factors for committing elder abuse?

- Using or abusing drugs or alcohol
- High stress levels
- Lack of social support
- Depression
- Lack of training in how to care for older people
- Emotional or financial dependence on the older person

What are the risk factors for suffering elder abuse?

Older people with dementia are at special risk. As many as 2 out of 3 people with dementia have been abused.

But elder abuse doesn’t only happen to the frail and sick. It can happen to any older person.
Elder abuse is **preventable** — and everyone has a role to play.

We can help ensure that older people live in safety — **without fear of being hurt, exploited, or neglected.**

**The public can:**
- Watch for signs of elder abuse
- Learn how to get help and report abuse

**Older people can:**
- Stay connected to family and friends
- Learn more about their rights
- Use professional services for support where available
- Make sure their financial and legal affairs are in order

**Family and informal caregivers can** lower their risk of committing abuse by learning ways to cope:
- Get help from family or friends
- Take breaks
- Get support from local health and social services
The health sector can help stop elder abuse in communities, hospitals, and institutions.

There are promising strategies, such as developing:

- Professional awareness campaigns to help health care workers recognize elder abuse
- Caregiver support to reduce stress
- Caregiver training on dementia
- Residential care policies to define and improve standards of care

However, most nations report that they still don’t have formal action plans to address elder abuse. A recent survey of 133 countries found that:

- Only 40% had national plans
- Only 17% had a national survey

We also need more research about elder abuse — its risk factors, consequences, and solutions — especially in low- and middle-income countries.
Around the world, governments can do more to address and prevent elder abuse. The health sector can:

1. Raise awareness within the health sector and other sectors about the health and social burden of elder abuse
2. Recognize elder abuse as a public health problem and establish a focal point to address elder abuse
3. Develop and test evidence-based interventions to prevent elder abuse
4. Provide services to victims of elder abuse
5. Collaborate with other sectors to address elder abuse, such as criminal justice, health, and social services

Support World Elder Abuse Awareness Day on 15 June

Get involved — contact your local ageing services organization

Raise awareness — talk with friends, family and colleagues

WHO Resources:
- Global status report on violence prevention 2014
- Violence prevention: the evidence
- WHO Departments for Management of NCDs, Disability, Violence, and Injury Prevention and Ageing and Life Course