

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day – June 15th

Today, June 15th is World Elder Abuse Awareness Day.

Elder abuse is an under recognized problem with devastating and even life threatening consequences.

Every day, the headlines paint a grim picture of seniors who have been abused, neglected, and exploited, often by people they trust the most. Abusers may be spouses, family members, personal acquaintances, or professionals in positions of trust; or opportunistic strangers who prey on the vulnerable. No one knows for certain how big this problem is because relatively few cases are identified. However, research shows that more than one in ten elders may experience some type of abuse, but only one in five cases or fewer are reported. This means that very few seniors who have been abused get the help they need. One thing is for certain: elder abuse can happen to any older individual – your neighbor, your loved one, it can even happen to you.

What is Elder Abuse?

In general, elder abuse refers to intentional or neglectful acts by a caregiver or “trusted” individual that lead to, or may lead to, harm of a vulnerable elder. Physical abuse; neglect; emotional or psychological abuse; verbal abuse and threats; financial abuse and exploitation; sexual abuse; and abandonment are considered forms of elder abuse. In many states, self-neglect is also considered mistreatment. Elder Abuse can occur anywhere - in the home, in nursing homes, or other institutions.

Warning Signs of Abuse

- Physical Abuse - Slap marks, unexplained bruises, most pressure marks, and certain types of burns or blisters, such as cigarette burns
- Neglect - Pressure ulcers, filth, lack of medical care, malnutrition or dehydration
- Emotional Abuse - Withdrawal from normal activities, unexplained changes in alertness, or other unusual behavioral changes
- Sexual Abuse - Bruises around the breasts or genital area and unexplained sexually transmitted diseases
- Financial Abuse/Exploitation - Sudden change in finances and accounts, altered wills and trusts, unusual bank withdrawals, checks written as “loans” or “gifts,” and loss of property

- Neglect - A caregiver's failure or refusal to provide for a vulnerable elder's safety, physical, or emotional needs
- Abandonment - Desertion of a frail or vulnerable elder by anyone with a duty of care
- Self-neglect - An inability to understand the consequences of one's own actions or inaction, which leads to, or may lead to, harm or endangerment

What can you do to prevent Elder Abuse?

- Report suspected mistreatment to your local adult protective services agency or law enforcement. Although a situation may have already been investigated, if you believe circumstances are getting worse, continue to speak out.
- Keep in contact – Talk with your older friends, neighbors, and relatives. Maintaining communication will help decrease isolation, a risk factor for mistreatment. It will also give them a chance to talk about any problems they may be experiencing.
- Be aware of the possibility of abuse – Look around and take note of what may be happening with your older neighbors and acquaintances. Do they seem lately to be withdrawn, nervous, fearful, sad, or anxious, especially around certain people, when they have not seemed so in the past?
- Contact your local Area Agency on Aging office to identify local programs and sources of support, such as Meals on Wheels. These programs help elders to maintain health, well-being, and independence – a good defense against abuse.
- Volunteer – There are many local opportunities to become involved in programs that provide assistance and support for seniors.

If you Suspect Elder Abuse

- Report Your Concerns. Remember: Most cases of elder abuse go undetected. Don't assume that someone has already reported a suspicious situation.
- To report suspected abuse in the community, contact your local adult protective services agency. For state reporting numbers, visit the NCEA website at www.ncea.aoa.
- If you or someone you know is in a life threatening situation or immediate danger, contact 911 or the local police or sheriff. Remember: You do not need to prove that abuse is occurring; it is up to the professionals to investigate the suspicions.