

What Health Care Students Need to Know About Elder Abuse

As a health care student encountering older patients, you will be in a unique position to help prevent and detect elder abuse.

What is elder mistreatment?

Elder mistreatment is an intentional act or failure to act that causes or creates a risk of harm to an older adult. Common types of elder mistreatment include physical, sexual, emotional/psychological, or financial abuse, neglect, or self-neglect. Multiple forms of mistreatment can co-occur.

Did you know?



1 in 10 community-dwelling older adults experiences abuse every year.



1 in 3 older adults with cognitive impairment experiences abuse.



Only **1 in 24** cases of elder abuse is reported.



Elder abuse has significant **medical, mental health, financial, and social impacts.**



Elder Abuse occurs across all **cultures, contexts, and communities.**



Older adults who are abused have a **3x higher risk of death** compared to those who have not been mistreated.

Signs

Since individuals experience harm in different ways, look for anomalous changes.



Physical

- Malnutrition, dehydration, or unexplained weight loss
- Sudden mental status changes unrelated to advancing dementia
- Uncontrolled pain despite pharmacological treatment
- Uncontrolled conditions such as hypertension, heart failure, asthma, or diabetes
- Inadequately explained bruises, lacerations, abrasions, fractures, or pressure ulcers
- Trauma to genital area, infection, or unexplained sexually transmitted diseases



Psychological/Emotional

- Unusual changes in behavior or sleep
- Increased fear or anxiety
- Isolation from friends or family or withdrawal from normal activities



Financial

- Fraudulent signatures on financial documents or unpaid bills
- Unusual or sudden changes in spending patterns, will, or other financial documents



Social

- Patient discomfort in the presence of family member/caregiver
- Caregiver resistance to the patient being seen alone
- Caregiver is disengaged, inattentive, overly anxious, or hovering
- Caregiver expresses frustration, anger, or burden related to caregiving



Environmental

- Unsanitary living conditions or unsafe environment
- Evidence of poor hygiene, unattended medical needs, or self-neglect

Risk Factors



Vulnerable older adult

- Medical or mental health conditions and/or cognitive impairments
- Frailty and/or functional deficits
- Social isolation
- Stress and poor coping mechanisms



Trusted other

- Economic and/or emotional dependency
- Substance abuse
- Stress and poor coping mechanisms



Context

- Social connectedness and access to community resources
- Cultural norms
- Quality of relationship

Mandated Reporting

Health care professionals may be legally required to report known or suspected abuse. Know the law in your state.

Screening

Screening instruments may assist professionals in identifying the risk or presence of abuse. Screening must be tailored to the setting, population, and used in combination with observation and expert evaluation. For example, the Elder Mistreatment Screening and Response Tool (EM-SART) is a brief tool used in emergency departments, and includes the following questions:

- Has anyone close to you harmed you?
- Has anyone close to you failed to give you the care that you need?
- Has anyone tried to force you to sign papers or use your money against your will?

Documentation

- Physical markers of maltreatment
- Social, contextual, psychological, and financial signs of abuse and neglect
- Communications, conduct, or attitudes that signal suspected abuse



Tip: Use the [Geriatric Injury Documentation Tool](#) and [Bruising in Older Adults](#) to help identify and document indicators of abuse.

Intervention Strategies

- Provide person-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive care
- Consult with the older adult about their goals and preferences
- Collaborate with interdisciplinary professionals to treat, safety plan, and reduce harm

Reporting Resources

In cases of imminent harm, report to law enforcement. Report abuse in the community to Adult Protective Services. Report concerns in facilities to the Long-Term Care Ombudsman. Local reporting and community resources can be accessed through Eldercare Locator at **1-800-677-1116** or visit <https://eldercare.acl.gov>.



**Don't stand by, stand up to elder abuse.
You can make a difference.**

Keck School of
Medicine of **USC**