

Health Article

# Shining a light on elder abuse

Elder abuse is more common than you might think. Here's how to spot the warning signs and what you can do to help keep our seniors safe.

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By Paula Kehoe

It's troubling and somewhat surprising when we hear about a senior being mistreated. Yet, abuse and neglect of elderly men and women is high. About 766,000 Canadian seniors reported experiencing abuse in 2015, according to a [study](#) by the National Initiative for the Care of the Elderly.

Recently, more seniors have been in isolation because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Jane Vock, Caregiver Program Manager at [SE Health](#), worries seniors are suffering more behind closed doors.

"Crisis support services are getting increased calls," she says. "Seniors are also being targeted by scammers trying to capitalize on the pandemic."

Only 20% of seniors who experience elder abuse [report](#) it to someone who is able to help. Many might not even know how.

Vock says many cases of elder abuse go unreported. That could be because the victims are ashamed or they fear retaliation from their abuser. Others view having an abusive caregiver as better than having no caregiver. The fear of having to move out of their home can also prevent them from reporting it.

## What is elder abuse?

The Canadian government [defines](#) elder abuse as any action by someone in a relationship of trust that results in harm or distress to an older person. The abuse can take the form of domestic violence, financial abuse, neglect, physical harm, psychological abuse or sexual abuse.

"It's typically done by people who are directly responsible for the senior's care, such as a spouse, a grown child, a caregiver, or another family member or person they trust," Vock says.

Elder abuse can happen to anyone in any situation, Vock says. It happens across religions, ethnicities, to the rich and poor. However, a history of abuse, violence or a power/control dynamic within a relationship increases the risk, she says. "Isolation is also a big risk factor. The abuser will try to isolate the victim from other family members, friends and the community."

Vock says elder abuse often happens because of:

- addiction problems
- mental health issues
- [caregiver burnout](#)
- a cycle of family violence
- ageism

The abuse is to intimidate, humiliate, coerce, scare or to make the senior feel powerless.

## What to watch for

It's not always obvious when abuse is happening to our loved ones. But there are signs Vock says you can pay attention to in both the victim and abuser, including:

1. Psychological or emotional abuse: Watch for sudden changes in behaviour. "For example, the elderly person may be talking and suddenly go silent when the suspected abuser enters the room. Or the person may become more relaxed when the suspected abuser leaves the room," Vock says. The victim may also seem upset, agitated, withdrawn, non-responsive, or reluctant to talk openly. With a suspected abuser, you're looking at body language, tone of voice, insults or critical remarks, or threats.
2. Physical abuse: This results in some type of physical injury or impairment. It can range from fractures and bruises to scratches and sprains. Physical marks also could be warnings of sexual abuse and domestic violence.
3. Neglect: Some red flags are:
  - lack of proper clothing
  - malnutrition
  - dehydration
  - poor personal hygiene
  - bedsores

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- dirty living conditions
  - lack of needed medical care
4. **Financial abuse:** Financial abuse is one of the main forms of elder abuse, says Vock. The perpetrators often are family members. Watch for missing cheques and sudden and unusual changes in bank accounts or banking activity. Major changes to legal documents such as powers of attorney and wills are also a warning sign.

### How to help prevent elder abuse

Many forms of elder abuse are a crime, [according](#) to the RCMP. If you suspect someone you know is experiencing abuse, Vock suggests taking these steps:

- If you see an elder experiencing abuse, report the incident right away. If the elder is in immediate, life-threatening danger, call 911.
- Speak to them: "Be wise. Do it when they're alone and not in the presence of the abuser, says Vock. "Let them know that there are options and supports available to them. They may not be ready to deal with it or report it. But being non-judgemental and offering your personal support can make them feel less alone."
- Do not confront the abuser yourself. This may put the elder in more danger. Only consider confrontation if you have the elder's permission and you can move them somewhere safer right away.
- If you are an elder suffering abuse, neglect or exploitation, tell at least one person. Tell your doctor, a friend, or a family member you trust.
- The Government of Canada offers a [list](#) of resources. It also has reporting and support help lines that people can call toll-free for help.

*Written in consultation with Jane Vock, Caregiver Program Manager at SE Health.*

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Jane Vock, Caregiver Program Manager at SE Health

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