

Identifying and Initiating Intervention for Elder Abuse and Neglect in the Emergency Department

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KEYWORDS

- Elder abuse • Elder neglect • Elder mistreatment • Financial exploitation
- Emergency department • Geriatrics

KEY POINTS

- Elder abuse and neglect, which include physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, psychological abuse, and financial exploitation, are common and may have serious medical and social consequences but are infrequently identified.
- An emergency department (ED) visit represents a unique but usually missed opportunity to identify potential elder abuse or neglect and initiate intervention.
- ED assessment should include observation of patient-caregiver interaction, comprehensive medical history from the patient alone, and head-to-toe physical examination. Imaging and laboratory tests may be helpful. A team-based approach to detection including social workers and other ED professionals is valuable, and Emergency Medical Services providers may play a key role. Formal screening protocols may also be useful.
- ED providers concerned about elder abuse or neglect should document their findings in detail, including complete descriptions of all physical findings including injuries and should consider using a body diagram/traumagram or photographing findings.
- ED interventions for suspected or confirmed elder abuse or neglect include treatment of acute medical, traumatic, and psychological issues; ensuring patient safety; and reporting to the authorities.

The emergency department (ED) plays an important role in detection and intervention of elder abuse, a phenomenon with serious medical and social consequences that occurs commonly. Elder abuse encompasses behaviors or negligence against an older

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adult that result in harm or the risk of harm committed by someone in a relationship with an expectation of trust or when the victim is targeted because of age or disability. Abuse includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, psychological abuse, and financial exploitation (**Table 1**).¹⁻⁵ Elder abuse victims frequently suffer from multiple types at the same time.¹⁻⁵

Elder abuse and neglect are complex phenomena with multiple underlying causes. Many theories have been proposed that offer insight into possible causes in some cases and may be useful to clinicians.³ Family violence may be a learned behavior,

Type	Definition	Examples
Physical abuse	Intentional use of physical force that may result in bodily injury, physical pain, or impairment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slapping, hitting, kicking, pushing, pulling hair • Use of physical restraints, force-feeding • Burning, use of household objects as weapons, use of firearms and knives
Sexual abuse	Any type of sexual contact with an elderly person that is nonconsensual or sexual contact with any person incapable of giving consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual assault or battery, such as rape, sodomy, coerced nudity, and sexually explicit photographing • Unwanted touching, verbal sexual advances • Indecent exposure
Neglect	Refusal or failure to fulfill any part of a person's obligations or duties to an elder, which may result in harm—may be intentional or unintentional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withholding of food, water, clothing, shelter, medications • Failure to ensure elder's personal hygiene or to provide physical aids, including walker, cane, glasses, hearing aids, dentures • Failure to ensure elder's personal safety and/or appropriate medical follow-up
Emotional/ psychological abuse	Intentional infliction of anguish, pain, or distress through verbal or nonverbal acts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal berating, harassment, or intimidation • Threats of punishment or deprivation • Treating the older person like an infant • Isolating the older person from others
Financial/ material exploitation	Illegal or improper use of an older adult's money, property, or assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stealing money or belongings • Cashing an older adult's checks without permission and/or forging his or her signature • Coercing an older adult into signing contracts, changing a will, or assigning durable power of attorney against his or her wishes or when the older adult does not possess the mental capacity to do so

Adapted from National Center on Elder Abuse. Types of abuse. Available at: <https://ncea.acl.gov/faq/abusetypes.html>. Accessed November 21, 2017.

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