

# Geriatric dermatology

## Part II. Risk factors and cutaneous signs of elder mistreatment for the dermatologist

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###### Learning Objectives

After completing this learning activity, participants should be able to recognize risk factors for elder abuse or neglect in the dermatology patient population; identify

cutaneous signs of elder abuse or neglect; and effectively respond to suspected elder abuse and neglect in the dermatology patient population.

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Cutaneous signs may be the most visible hint of elder mistreatment. Dermatologists are in a unique position to recognize and report physical abuse and neglect in the older patient population. In this review, we describe the scope and impact, risk factors, cutaneous signs, and appropriate responses to suspected elder mistreatment. There is a critical need for additional evidence to inform clinical practice in the field of elder abuse and neglect. Recognition and reporting of suspected elder mistreatment by the dermatologist can be life-saving for the older patient. (J Am Acad Dermatol 2013;68:533.e1-10.)

**Key words:** abuse; elder abuse; elder mistreatment; elder neglect; geriatrics; neglect; nutritional deficiency; pressure ulcer; purpura.

Dermatologists can have a vital role in the detection of suspected elder abuse and neglect. The US Department of Health and Human Services has reported that of all age groups, the highest rate of visits to dermatologists is in patients  $\geq 75$  years of age; there were 32 visits per 100 persons in 2009, with increases over the past 20 years.<sup>1</sup> Older patients are vulnerable to mistreatment when they have mental or physical limitations that lead them to rely on caregivers in day-to-day living. Skin signs may be the most visible hint of elder mistreatment. Therefore, dermatologists are in a unique position to recognize and report physical abuse and neglect in older patients.

### SCOPE AND IMPACT OF THE PROBLEM

Multiple studies have suggested that elder mistreatment is a highly prevalent yet underreported phenomenon.<sup>2-8</sup> In 2003, the National Research Council reported that an estimated 1 to 2 million Americans  $\geq 65$  years of age have been mistreated by a caregiver.<sup>3</sup> Other estimates are similar, ranging from 1% to 10% of the population  $>60$  years of age that are believed to have been abused.<sup>2-5</sup> The reporting rate in noninstitutional settings is lower than that in nursing homes, with only 1 in 14 incidents of elder abuse estimated to be reported to authorities.<sup>2-4,9</sup>

### CAPSULE SUMMARY

- The dermatologist can have a vital role in the detection of suspected elder abuse and neglect, because cutaneous signs may be the most visible hint of elder mistreatment.
- Appropriate detection and intervention by the dermatologist in cases of suspected elder mistreatment can be life-saving for the older patient.
- There is a critical need for good quality evidence on elder mistreatment on which to base clinical practice.

While the reporting rate is higher in nursing homes, it still underestimates the actual prevalence of elder abuse and neglect in the institutional setting.<sup>10-13</sup> A 2003 survey of 80 nondemented elderly residents in 23 nursing homes found that 44% reported being physically abused.<sup>6,7</sup> A 1989 study of 577 nurses and nurses' aides from 32 nursing homes revealed that 21% had observed excessive use of restraints, 17% observed pushing, grabbing, shoving, or pinching, and 12% observed slapping and hitting of elderly residents.<sup>10</sup>

The impact of elder abuse and neglect on patients is significant. The risk of death for elder abuse and neglect victims is 3 times that of nonvictims even after adjustment for confounding variables, such as demographics, comorbid conditions, and social factors.<sup>14-16</sup> Therefore, the recognition of elder mistreatment and effective intervention can be life-saving for the older patient.

### DEFINITION OF ELDER ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Elder abuse describes a range of acts that cause harm or potential for harm, intentionally or by neglect, to an older adult.<sup>7</sup> While elder abuse can be categorized in several ways, types of abuse with visible cutaneous manifestations include physical

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