

Many members of our population are elderly or disabled, and elect to have an in-home caregiver rather than move to a full-time care facility. Unfortunately, these caregivers can sometimes be unscrupulous, taking advantage of a situation for financial gain or being just in it for the paycheck and neglecting their patient.

Nearly a quarter of a million Californians become victims of elder or dependent adult abuse each year, and as our population grows and ages, that number is expected to climb. If you or someone you know is elderly or otherwise dependent on another adult for day-to-day assistance, you should know and be able to recognize the signs of abuse.

There are four main types of elder and dependent adult abuse:

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is just like it sounds: physical. Caregivers, whether a spouse, other relative, or an outside person, inflict physical pain and cause injuries to their charges. Signs include:

- Injuries that don't match the explanations given for them (for example, a black eye or broken jaw from a minor fall)
- Bruises, scratches, or other injuries, especially when frequent or in different stages of healing
- Inappropriate use of restraints or medication

Neglect

Neglect is a little bit more subtle than physical abuse, but is still fairly easy to spot. It, too, is just like it sounds: the caregiver simply doesn't care and ignores their charge. Signs include:

- Poor hygiene (for example, unbathed for an unreasonable amount of time; bedpans or adult diapers unchanged)
- Dirty or torn clothing
- Medical conditions that go untreated; bedsores
- Malnourished or dehydrated (for example, unexplained weight loss; "sunken" appearance to the face; severely chapped lips or hands)

Psychological Abuse

More insidious and difficult to detect than physical abuse or neglect is psychological abuse, in which the caregiver isolates their charge or makes them feel worthless or scared, much like in many domestic violence cases. Signs include:

- The elderly or dependent person becomes withdrawn, secretive, or hesitant to talk freely around the caregiver
- The caregiver isolates their charge, restricting when and with whom contact can be made (for example, the elder or dependent is not allowed to visit friends or family, or even seek non-emergent medical care)
- The elder or dependent adult becomes confused or extremely forgetful, in the absence of another reason for such forgetfulness

Financial Abuse

Financial (also called fiduciary) abuse may not be the most common form of elder or dependent abuse, but it is probably the most well-known. Nearly everyone has heard or read stories of elderly patients who have been swindled out of thousands of dollars by their caregivers. Signs include:

- Unusual bank activity (for example, large withdrawals or fund transfers, increased frequency or types of transactions with no plausible explanation); transactions conducted in manners "out-of-habit" (such as debit transactions when the elder or dependent normally writes checks)
- Unpaid bills, utilities shut-off, or eviction notices; sudden pattern of bounced checks
- Changes in spending patterns, often accompanied by the appearance of a new "best friend"
- Implausible explanations given by a relative or caregiver about an elder or dependent adult's finances

Types of Abusers

There are three types of abusers: plotting, happenstance, and overwhelmed. Plotting abusers

deliberately plot and scheme to take advantage of a situation, and are generally financial abusers. Happenstance abusers don't plan to abuse when they take on caregiving roles, but are presented with opportunities that cause them to undertake abusive behavior. Overwhelmed abusers are generally good-intentioned, but simply can't manage the responsibility, whether due to it being greater than they are capable of handling or due to other stressors in their own personal life.

When You Suspect Abuse

Many cases of elder and dependent adult abuse involve more than one type of abuse. For instance, financial abuse is often coupled with psychological abuse, in that the caregiver makes the elder or dependent adult feel as though they are incapable of managing their own finances, or an emotionally abusive caregiver becomes neglectful or even physically assaultive.

If you suspect that an elder or dependent adult is being abused, report it. Adult Protective Services (APS) is a County agency that investigates reports of suspected abuse, and will follow-up on each reported case with an in-person visit to the possible victim. APS social workers will investigate and assess the situation, and will work with the elder or dependent adult to get them the help they need. In cases of criminal abuse, APS will also work with law enforcement to file charges.

Sometimes it can be difficult to acknowledge that potential abuse is occurring, especially when the abuser is a relative ("Oh, Johnny would never do that!") or a caregiver from a supposedly reputable agency. However, it is critical to report any

suspected abuse as soon as you notice it, since the longer it is allowed to continue, the worse it will get.

Also pay attention to what the elderly or dependent person tells you, such as "My showers are always cold," or "They don't listen to me when I tell them I'm hungry." While it is possible that the person is confused or forgetful (such as when they had just eaten five minutes before telling the caregiver they were hungry again), these sorts of verbal cues can be also signs of neglect or physical abuse.

To report suspected elder or dependent adult abuse, call one of the following hotlines:

California Attorney General's Elder Abuse Hotline:
(800) 436-3600

Los Angeles County Adult Protective Services:
(877) 4-R-SENIORS (477-3646)
(213) 351-5401 (outside L.A. County)

To report suspected elder or dependent adult abuse at a long-term care facility (nursing home, residential care facility, or assisted living facility), call one of the above hotlines, or call the California Long Term Care Ombudsman's hotline at (800) 231-4024.

If you have reason to suspect criminal abuse that has the elder or dependent adult's life or safety in immediate jeopardy, contact the Sheriff's Station (in Lancaster, (661) 948-8466; in Palmdale, (661) 272-2400).