

20 ways YOU can help prevent elder abuse

Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services

Somewhere along the way, we've begun to lose our sense of community. We rush to work, rush home, rush to evening activities. We rush to get our chores done on the weekends, then rush inside and lock our doors. Many of us don't even know our next-door neighbors' names.

What's causing this? Are we less compassionate? Or are we caught up in a lifestyle that allows no time to notice what's happening around us or to help when we do notice?

Whatever it is, we need to come together again as neighbors, as communities. We need to make time to help each other.

Why? Because we can make a positive difference in the lives of older people and their families. It's time to get involved because:

- according to a national study, more than a half-million elderly people are abused every year in the United States -- and for every reported incident, five go unreported.
- people of all ages, regardless of their mental and physical abilities, have the right to be safe.
- society pays the price of most medical treatment, adult day care, nursing home care, home care, mental health services, intervention services, and housing assistance for the abused, as well as civil or criminal prosecutions of abusers.
- the problem is too big and too costly. Government programs alone can't fix it, but it can and must be stopped.
- each time an older person is neglected, abused, or killed, society loses the sum of a life – the knowledge gained from overcoming personal hardships and handicaps, the strengths earned by surviving tragedies and fears, and the wisdom achieved through loving others – losses that lessen us as a people and a country.

Because if we don't, who will?



What YOU Can Do

Here are some actions you can take to help older Kentuckians and their caregivers.

1. Learn to identify abuse and neglect.

Abuse may be physical (including sexual), emotional, or financial. Abuse happens when a caregiver intentionally inflicts injury, unreasonable confinement, intimidation, or cruel punishment on an older person that causes physical harm, pain, or mental anguish. Financial abuse happens when a caregiver illegally or improperly uses an older person's finances for the caregiver's personal profit or benefit.

Neglect may be either passive or active. Self-neglect happens when older people are unable to take care of themselves. Caregiver neglect happens when the person responsible for taking care of an elderly adult withholds food, water, medicine, clothes, personal care and assistance, medical care, dentures, hearing aid, eyeglasses, walker or wheel chair, and other needed care items, or services that could keep the elderly or disabled person from physical harm, mental anguish, or mental illness.

2. Learn to recognize the signs of abuse.

The signs of neglect and physical, emotional, and financial abuse are listed at the end of this publication.

3. Be a good neighbor.

Get to know your neighbors. Be aware of what's going on in your neighborhood. Visit your elderly neighbors – isolation and loneliness are major causes of depression. If their lawns are overgrown, mow them. If you notice that their mail and newspapers aren't being picked up, check on them. Cook an extra portion and take them dinner. Organize other neighbors to be responsible for taking them dinner one night a week — malnutrition can cause confusion, disorientation, and apathy. Take them to get a haircut or, if they're homebound, have a hair stylist or barber come to their homes. Include them in your family activities. Take their pets for walks and to the vet; help with pets' grooming and medications.

4. Reach out to neighbors or relatives who are caregivers.

Offer to stay with the elderly person so the caregiver can run errands or simply get out of the house for a while. Offer to drive the elderly person to medical appointments to give the caregiver a break.

5. Be a friend to a caregiver.

Listen. Sometimes, just being able to express anger and frustration helps ease tensions. Take a caregiver shopping or to a movie. Invite a caregiver to go walking, jogging, or golfing — exercise helps relieve stress. Organize a Caregivers Support Group through your church.

6. Take action...don't wait for someone else to do it!

Arrange for a speaker on adult abuse and neglect to come to your PTA, church, club, or workplace. The more we all know about abuse and neglect, the more we can do to stop it.

7. Organize safety systems for your neighborhood.

Arrange for neighbors who are at home most of the day to watch out for elderly neighbors. Set up and participate in a telephone network to check on them twice a day. Make sure your elderly neighbors have the telephone numbers of network members so they can call if they need help or reassurance.

8. Be alert to neighborhood scams.

Many elderly people are trusting, and, therefore, vulnerable to con artists. Call the Better Business Bureau about people going door-to-door selling products or offering home improvements or repairs. Be wary of telephone callers asking for credit card numbers, cash, or checks for products or donations to a charity. Report them to your local law enforcement agency. Tell your neighbors.

9. Volunteer.

Volunteer your time at an emergency shelter, a caregivers' support program, a friendly visitors organization, meals-on-wheels, or an Area Agency on Aging. Collect holiday and birthday gifts for the elderly adults in your community.

10. Form a Carpenters Guild.

Work with others in your church, club, or workplace to repair elderly adults' homes to make them more livable and safe. Build ramps, install grab bars, paint, repair roofs.

11. Set up an after-school-hours program at a nursing home.

It's hard to tell who benefits more from such an arrangement — the children or the elders.

12. Start a resource room.

Call your local office of the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services' Department of Community Based Services and collect clothing, adult diapers, eyeglasses, and personal items for elderly people who have been removed from their homes because of abuse and neglect. Donate blankets, non-perishable food items, pet food, and household items. Or hold a fund raiser to buy hearing aids, dentures, walkers, wheel chairs, special equipment, and medicine for the victims.

13. Work in an adult day-activity center.

Volunteer your time in a day-activity center that serves elderly people. Or work with your church, club, or organization to form a partnership with an adult day-activity center that serves low-income people.

14. Visit a nursing home resident.

Visit a resident who seldom has visits from family or friends. Take flowers. Listen. Laugh. Ask if she would like to tell you about her life; then prepare some questions and record her answers. Drop in at times other than your regularly scheduled visit and be aware of what's happening at times when visitors are not usually around.

15. Take your pet to visit.

Get involved in a nursing home pet project, or take your pet with you when you visit an elderly neighbor. The simple act of petting a cat or dog can decrease blood pressure, stimulate conversation, bring back old memories, and help lift depression.

16. Learn more about adult abuse and its prevention. Teach others.

Plan an adult education program in your church, club, or organization to inform people about the needs of the elderly and their caregivers. Open your group's facility to local support groups for caregivers.

17. Be aware of community services.

Sometimes caregivers are so stressed they don't have time to look for help. Learn about the skilled home nursing, personal care, respite care, meals-on-wheels, day-activity care, friendly visitors, and homemaker and chore services available in your community. Help the caregiver contact the services.

18. Understand which people are most likely to be abusers.

In elder abuse and neglect, the typical abuser is most frequently a middle-aged adult child of the victim. Neglect and physical, emotional, and financial abuse are more likely when there is a family history of emotional instability, abuse and neglect, or alcohol or drug abuse. A large number of abusers are dependent on the victim for financial support and housing. In other cases, the stress of caregiving and not knowing where to get help can lead to abuse and neglect.

19. Understand which people are most likely to be abused.

Older victims are typically women who are widowed, over age 75, white, highly dependent, and frail. For victims of elder abuse and neglect, the abuser – who may also be a caregiver – could be all that stands between them and being placed in a nursing home.

20. Report suspected abuse and neglect.

Call **1-800-752-6200** or your local law enforcement agency if you think an elderly person is being neglected or physically, emotionally, or financially abused. *Remember, victims are often afraid to ask for help for fear of being abandoned or hurt.*

If you suspect it, you must report it—that's the law.

A report of suspected abuse makes it possible for an elderly person to get help.



It's Up to You

No matter what age we are, we need acceptance, love, encouragement, and positive attention to be happy. But it's harder to get those things if we're alone, sick, and afraid. And it's even harder to give those things if we're tired, stressed, and feel trapped.

Yes, it's hard to find the time to help. But in this time of families fractured by distance or old hurts, of neighbors boxed off by high fences and locked doors, of elderly people isolated by fear and pain, and of resources shrinking or disappearing, we must get involved.

You can help older Kentuckians and their caregivers do their best — with your knowledge and support, your help and commitment, and your time and compassion.

It's time to stop the abuse. And it really is up to you.



Signs of Abuse and Neglect

If you believe that an elderly person is in imminent danger, call **1-800-752-6200** or your local law enforcement agency immediately. If the person is not in imminent danger but you are suspicious, watch the way the caregiver acts toward the elderly person. Look for a pattern of threatening, harassing, blaming, or making demeaning remarks to the person — or isolating the person from family members and friends. Watch for an obvious lack of helpfulness or indifference, aggression, or anger toward the person. Listen for conflicting stories about the elderly or disabled person's illnesses or injuries.

Learn to recognize the following signs of self neglect, caregiver neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and financial abuse.

Neglect

- Obvious malnutrition, dehydration
- Dirty, uncombed hair and offensive body odor
- Torn and dirty clothes that are not appropriate for the weather
- Unshaven
- Lack of glasses, dentures, or hearing aid
- Lack of medical care
- Apparent weight loss
- Bedsores
- Recent suffering or loss of spouse, family members, or close friends
- Exterior or interior of the home in poor repair
- Filthy living environment, strong odors
- Little or no food in the refrigerator, or decayed and moldy food
- Many pets or animals who appear neglected
- Garbage or litter; excessive alcohol containers
- Unkempt lawn or walks
- Mail or newspapers not taken in

Physical Abuse

- Frequent injuries such as bruises, burns, broken bones, especially when the explanation of the injury seems unrealistic
- Multiple bruises in various stages of healing, particularly bruises on inner arms or thighs
- Chronic or acute physical illness
- Pain on being touched
- Obvious malnutrition, dehydration
- Loss of bowel and bladder control
- Many medicine bottles in sight; seems sleepy, sedated
- Appears frightened or withdrawn
- Never leaves the house; never allowed visitors
- Never mentions family or friends
- Confined to a chair or bed
- Locked in a room or tied up
- Clothes that are not appropriate for the weather

Sexual Abuse

- Evidence of sexually transmitted disease
- Irritation or injuries to the mouth, genitals, or anus
- Upset when changed or bathed
- Fearful of a particular person
- Loss of bowel and bladder control

Emotional/Psychological Abuse

- Isolated from family and friends
- Sudden dramatic change in behavior: appears withdrawn, depressed, hesitant to talk openly
- Caregiver won't let victim speak for herself
- Caregiver scolds, insults, threatens victim
- Trembling, clinging
- Fearful, hopeless, anxious
- Lack of eye contact
- Confused, disoriented
- Angry, agitated

Financial Abuse

- Unusual activity in bank account; sudden large withdrawals, expenditures that are not consistent with past financial history
- Use of Automated Teller Machines (ATM) when the person has no history of using ATMs or cannot walk or get to an ATM
- A recent Will, when the person seems incapable of writing a Will
- Rights signed away on legal papers without understanding what the papers mean
- Unpaid bills, such as house payment, rent, taxes, utilities
- Lack of food, clothing, or personal supplies
- Title to home signed over in exchange for a promise of "life-long care"

- Missing personal belongings such as art, silverware, jewelry, TV



Dynamics of Elder Abuse

What challenges do dependent older Kentuckians face?

Chronic illness...slow-to-heal injuries...difficulty moving around...lack of transportation...medication side effects...confusion and disorientation... loss of appetite...sleeping difficulties...declining eyesight and hearing... memory loss...isolation...depression...loneliness... fear...financial problems ...drug abuse...alcoholism.

All of these situations can make it difficult or impossible for older Kentuckians to take care of themselves. Even the most capable person can fall into a state of self-neglect during grief and depression following the loss of a beloved family member, friend, or pet.

What causes a person to hurt an older Kentuckian?

Unrealistic expectations of caregiving...increased demands and criticism from other family members...a strained relationship with a marriage partner...inability to concentrate at work...the emotional strain of worrying about a loved one's safety...fatigue...a lack of knowledge of techniques for dealing with disabilities, especially the behaviors associated with dementia...little or no recognition for the unrelenting work...feelings of being isolated and trapped...financial problems...drug abuse...alcoholism...a history of being abused as a child.

These are examples of problems that can cause caregivers to take out anger and frustration on elderly people. Even very loving caregivers can lose control to the point of abuse.