



PEAK
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**Peak Development for ...
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The Vulnerable Adult: Abuse and Neglect

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Describe characteristics of the vulnerable adult and risk factors for abuse.
2. Define five types of abuse.
3. Identify signs of possible abuse.
4. Discuss ways to prevent abuse and actions to take if it is suspected.

Abuse of elderly and disabled adults is a serious public health problem in the US and worldwide. According to data from the National Council on Aging, an estimated 10% of adults over age 60 experience abuse. Since a great majority of cases are never reported, this figure is likely much higher. This issue is expected to worsen with the rapid increase in the elderly population. The number of Americans age 65 and over is expected to double in the next thirty years.



This newsletter will discuss abuse and neglect of vulnerable adults, those who are elderly or disabled. Types of abuse, risk factors and signs will be covered, as well as the importance of identifying and reporting possible abuse.

The Vulnerable Adult

Laws for the protection of vulnerable adults are regulated mainly at the state level. Because of this, regulations vary from state to state, including definitions of vulnerable adults and reporting requirements. It is important to be familiar with the laws in your state.

Vulnerable adults are commonly defined as adults 60 (or 65) years of age or older, and those 18 years and older, with a physical, mental or functional impairment that causes them to require assistance with care and/or decision-making. Vulnerable

adults have a reduced ability to protect themselves from abuse. Adults living in residential facilities or receiving services from a licensed home care provider are typically included in this definition.

Vulnerable adults with the following risk factors are at increased likelihood of abuse and neglect:

- increasing age
- social isolation
- communication problems
- memory problems
- being highly dependent on others for daily care
- being unable to recognize abuse or inappropriate actions of others
- family history of substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health issues or high stress
- having arguments or tension with the caregiver or family members

Types of Abuse

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines abuse as any intentional act or failure to act by a caregiver or other trusted person that results in harm or risk of harm. Abuse can occur as a single incident, or may be an ongoing pattern of behavior. It can occur in the home (domestic abuse) or in institutions, such as hospitals and residential care facilities. Types of abuse include:



- **Physical:** causing physical pain or

harm by using force, such as rough handling, hitting, slapping, burning, or restraining.

- **Emotional:** causing mental pain by threatening, embarrassing, intimidating or controlling. Examples include yelling at or treating the person like a child, calling them names, and isolating them from others by refusing to allow visitors or limiting phone contact.
- **Sexual:** sexual contact without the consent of the person, which may involve inappropriate touching or nudity, rape or other sexual activity.
- **Financial:** misuse of money or property, such as stealing from vulnerable persons, or not allowing them to have or use their money.
- **Neglect:** failing to provide the daily care needed by the vulnerable person, such as food, clothing, hygiene, and medications. Neglect is also failure to keep the person from harm, such as allowing them to wander outside in traffic or cold weather.

What Are The Signs of Abuse?

As a home health aide, you spend a lot of time with your clients. It is very important that you watch for signs of abuse, so that the victim can be helped as quickly as possible. Remember, abuse can happen in any setting. The abuser may be a family member, friend, or even one of your co-workers. The signs of abuse depend on what type of abuse is occurring.



Physical abuse may be suspected if the client has cuts, bruises or broken bones that cannot be explained. There may be a number of injuries in various stages of healing, such as round cigarette burns.

Signs of sexual abuse may include red, irritated genitals or a sexually transmitted disease. Victims of emotional abuse may act depressed, withdrawn or upset, and may show a change in behavior, such as thumb-sucking or rocking. A person who has been neglected may appear thin, dirty, or dehydrated, and may have pressure injuries. Financial abuse is harder to see. The client may complain about losing money or belongings. Bank accounts may be shrinking or bills may go unpaid.

Listen carefully to your clients. Their words and actions may alert you to abuse. You might suspect abuse if you ask how a client hurt himself, and the client and family member give you two different stories. The client may become fearful and upset each time the abuser is present. If a client makes comments such as, "He hurts me," ask for more

information when the person is not present. Do not confront or accuse the suspected abuser directly, and make sure all questioning of the client is done when the suspected abuser is not present.

Reporting Abuse

It is a sad fact that most cases of abuse are never reported. There are many reasons for this. Victims may fear making the abuser angry, causing the abuse to get worse. Or, the victim may not want to get the abuser "in trouble." Often, an elderly person living at home is afraid to report abuse for fear of having to move into a nursing home. Also, some victims can't report abuse due to problems with speech or mental function.



To protect vulnerable adults, laws are in place in all states that require certain healthcare providers to report suspected abuse. If you are required in your state to report suspected adult abuse, you may be held legally responsible if you don't do so. You do not need to have proof of abuse to report it. It's important that you become familiar with the reporting laws in your state. Immediately report any suspected abuse to your supervisor, as well as the required agency in your state or abuse hotline.

It is very important to document exactly what made you think abuse is happening. Write it clearly and use only facts, not your opinion. Don't write, "Mrs. G. looks sad because her son hurts her." Instead, write the facts: "Mrs. G. states, 'I'm afraid of my son. He hurts me.' Purple bruise two inches wide noted on left upper arm. Mrs. G. states her son grabbed her arm there."

Keeping Your Clients Safe

You can help to prevent abuse. If a family member shows stress or anger, let your supervisor know so that the person can be referred to some helpful resources. Also, keep in touch with your own feelings as you care for your clients. You have a job that can be very stressful at times. If you ever feel that you're losing patience or getting angry, take a break from the situation until you're back in control.

Your clients trust you to take care of them, and to look out for their physical and emotional well-being. You can help to do this by keeping them safe and reporting suspected abuse.



The Vulnerable Adult: Abuse and Neglect

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- ____ 1. In the next 30 years, the number of Americans age 65 and older is expected to:
- A. decrease by 40%
 - B. remain the same as today
 - C. double
 - D. increase slightly
- ____ 2. Laws regarding abuse of vulnerable adults are regulated mainly by each state, and each state may have different regulations.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ____ 3. Vulnerable adult definitions commonly include adults who are:
- A. 60 or 65 years of age or older and receiving home care services
 - B. living in a residential care facility
 - C. 18 years of age or older with impairments that require assistance with care
 - D. all of the above
- ____ 4. Which of the following adults is most at risk for abuse or neglect?
- A. Mr. F, age 63, who works as an electrical engineer and uses a wheelchair
 - B. Mrs. Y, age 42, who cares for her children full-time and has type 2 diabetes
 - C. Mr. C, age 28, who has autism and can't speak or care for himself
 - D. Ms. L, age 68, who requires home care due to multiple sclerosis and has frequent visits from her friends
- ____ 5. Abuse is defined by the CDC as:
- A. doing something that the victim feels is offensive
 - B. an intentional act or failure to act by a trusted person that results in harm
 - C. criminal actions committed by a stranger, such as a robbery
 - D. taking an action that leaves a visible mark or bruise on the victim

- ___6. In order for a vulnerable adult to be considered abused, more than one abusive incident must have occurred.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ___7. Which of the following is considered emotional abuse?
- A. stealing money or property
 - B. not providing food or clean clothing
 - C. hitting or slapping
 - D. not allowing visitors or phone use
- ___8. A victim of adult abuse appears thin, with poor hygiene and pressure injuries. These are characteristic signs of which type of abuse?
- A. financial
 - B. emotional
 - C. physical
 - D. neglect
- ___9. When the home health aide notices a large bruise on the side of Mrs. B's head, her adult son states that she fell in the bathroom yesterday. Mrs. B says nothing and looks down, fidgeting. The home health aide should:
- A. do nothing, since it appears that Mrs. B fell in the bathroom
 - B. ask the son, where Mrs. B can't hear the conversation, if he hurt his mother
 - C. ask Mrs. B, after her son leaves, what happened and if anyone has hurt her
 - D. call 911 immediately to have Mrs. B taken from the home to the hospital
- ___10. Most cases of adult abuse are reported, because the victim wants to get help.
- A. True
 - B. False

