

## What is Elder Abuse?

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### **Definition**

Elder abuse is defined as:

*"a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person or violates their human and civil rights".*

[\(Protecting Our Future - Report of the Working Group on Elder Abuse, 2002\)](#)

In Ireland, the term elder abuse refers to abuse of people over 65 years of age.

### **Types of Elder Abuse**

Elder abuse can occur in many forms and may be the result of deliberate intent, negligence or ignorance. A person may experience more than one form of abuse at a time. Types of elder mistreatment include:

- Physical Abuse

Physical abuse has been defined as the non-accidental infliction of physical force that results in a bodily injury, pain or impairment. Physical abuse may include hitting, slapping, pushing, kicking, misuse of medication and inappropriate restraint.

- Psychological Abuse

Psychological or emotional abuse may include the persistent use of threats, humiliation, bullying, intimidation, isolation, swearing and other verbal conduct that results in mental or physical distress.

- Financial Abuse

Financial or material abuse has been defined as the unauthorised and improper use of funds, property or any resources of an older person. This may include theft, coercion, fraud, misuse of power of attorney, and also not contributing to household costs where this was previously agreed.

- Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse refers to any sexual acts to which an older person has not or could not consent, including talking to or touching in a sexual way.

- Neglect

Neglect refers to the repeated deprivation of assistance needed by an older person for important activities of daily living. This may include ignoring or refusing to help with physical care needs, failing to provide access to appropriate health services, or withholding necessities such as adequate nutrition and heating.

- Discriminatory Abuse

Discriminatory abuse may include racism, ageism, discrimination based on disability, other forms of harassment, slur or similar treatment.

- Institutional Abuse

Institutional abuse may occur within residential care and acute settings including nursing homes, acute hospitals and any other in-patient settings, and may involve poor standards of care, rigid routines and inadequate responses to complex needs.

### **How big is the problem?**

International studies estimate the prevalence of abuse in the community at between 1% to 5% of the population aged 65 years and older.

A recent report by the NCPOP, [Abuse and Neglect of Older People in Ireland](#) (2010), provided the first national prevalence statistics on the extent of elder abuse and neglect amongst community-dwelling older people.

The overall prevalence of elder abuse and neglect in the previous 12 months was 2.2%. This suggests that over 10,000 people over the age of 65 years experienced mistreatment in the past year.

Financial abuse was the most common type reported at 1.3%, followed by psychological abuse (1.2%), physical abuse (0.5%), neglect (0.3%) and sexual abuse (0.05%).

Approximately 4% of older people living in the community have experienced some form of abuse since turning 65 years of age.

The HSE dedicated elder abuse service, established in 2007, receives over 1,800 referrals for alleged cases of elder abuse each year. In 2009 psychological abuse was the most frequently reported form of abuse at 28%, followed by self-neglect (21%), financial abuse (18%), neglect (17%) and physical abuse (12%), sexual abuse (1%) and other/discrimination (3%).

Ten percent of referrals recorded in the HSE database relate to individuals living in nursing homes or continuing care environments. It is not possible to estimate the prevalence of elder abuse in residential care settings as no research has yet been carried out in Ireland to establish the extent of institutional elder abuse.

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## Sources

National Council on Ageing and Older People (NCAOP) (2009) Review of the Recommendations of Protecting Our Future: Report of the the Working Group on Elder Abuse. Department of Health and Children, Dublin.

Naughton, C., Drennan, J., Treacy, M.P., Lafferty, A., Lyons, I., Phelan, A., Quin, S., O'Loughlin, A. & Delaney, L. (2010) Abuse and Neglect of Older People in Ireland: Report on the National Study of Elder Abuse and Neglect.

Working Group on Elder Abuse (2002) Protecting Our Future: Report of the Working Group on Elder Abuse. The Stationery Office, Dublin.