

Nursing Home Abuse: **How to Spot it and How to Get Help**

All older people have the right to live free from abuse and neglect. Yet, thousands of nursing home residents experience mistreatment every year. It is estimated that nearly one in two people with dementia experience abuse during their illness.¹ Many nursing home residents find it difficult to speak out about their abuse and many find it harder when, or if, people don't believe them. Others may lack the capacity to report abuse or recognize when it has occurred. Families and friends can help by watching for signs of abuse and taking appropriate action if they suspect abuse.

Abuse is the deliberate infliction of injury, unreasonable confinement, intimidation, or punishment, which results in physical harm, pain, or mental anguish. This includes verbal, sexual, physical, or mental abuse, as well as abuse enabled through the use of technology.

What Families Can Do to Identify Abuse

Listen and Ask Questions

- Take the time to sit with and actively listen to the residents.
- Ask open ended questions, like "how are things going?"
- Make eye contact.
- Trust what they tell you until proven otherwise.

Observe

- Any sudden change in behavior should prompt you to ask what's going on.
- Observe for physical injuries – not every bed sore or bruise is a sign of abuse, but they can be and should raise questions.

Work with the Staff

- Discuss concerns with the staff and ask them what's happening. Ongoing, early communication can help address minor issues and prevent escalating problems. If talking to the staff person directly involved does not resolve the concern, file a grievance using the nursing home's grievance process, or ask to meet with someone with more authority, such as the Director of Nursing or the Administrator.
- Ask for a care planning conference to review the current care plan and the resident's needs. Modify the plan if warranted and ask how the nursing home is going to ensure the plan is followed.



¹ <https://ncea.acl.gov/What-We-Do/Research/Statistics-and-Data.aspx>

Talk to Other Residents and Families

- Talk to your loved one's roommate – or people who may have seen something happen.
- Reach out to the family council to learn what others are experiencing. These councils can present concerns to the facility and, according to law, the facility must act on council complaints. If the nursing home does not have a family council, start one yourself. Find information about family councils on [our website](#).

If a resident with dementia alleges abuse, believe them unless there is a reason not to. Find the best time of day to talk to them. Some people with dementia have a harder time early in the morning or in the evening. Take the time to really listen to what they are saying.

Nursing homes have a responsibility to protect residents from abuse. This includes ensuring sufficient, properly trained staff to care for residents, adequate facility oversight, and infection control protocols. Reducing staff turnover, by providing a positive and supportive work environment, also lowers the likelihood of abuse.

If You Suspect Abuse is Occurring

- Make sure the resident who has been targeted is safe, and their immediate care needs are being met.
- If a resident's safety is at risk or a crime might have occurred, call 911 or the local police department to report the alleged abuse. If recent physical abuse is suspected, preserve any physical evidence of the abuse--do not bathe, urinate, change, wash clothing or bedding, or brush teeth or gargle. See the resources available in the [Elder Abuse Guide for Law Enforcement](#).
- Report the abuse to the nursing home administrator and the person in charge of the facility at the time of the incident.
- Obtain medical attention for the resident and support from victim's services programs. If warranted, the medical provider or victim's services advocate can talk to the resident about the need for a rape kit, gain consent, and then ensure they get one done.
- Call your Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program. Long-Term Care Ombudsman programs are advocates for individuals living in long-term care facilities. They are trained to resolve problems and can assist with complaints. [Find your Ombudsman program](#).
- Call Adult Protective Services (APS). In some states, APS investigates suspected abuse of nursing home residents. APS in your area can be reached by visiting the [National Adult Protective Services Association](#) website.
- Call your state's Licensing and Certification Agency. This is the agency that inspects nursing homes and investigates complaints.
- Continue to connect with the resident to monitor their status and recommend medical and psychological support if appropriate and desired.



Family members, Ombudsmen, and volunteer visitor advocates can play a critical role in supporting the wellbeing of older residents in facilities.