



## *Elder Abuse and the Health of Older Adults*

Estimates are that a half million older adults (over 60) will be victims of elder abuse this year in the United States. In nine out of ten cases, the perpetrator will be a family member. Elder abuse can take many forms: physical battering, neglect by caregivers to provide basic needs such as food and medicine, emotional or psychological mistreatment. It can also take the form of financial exploitation or sexual abuse.

Many people associate elder abuse with physical mistreatment of older adults. In fact, physical assaults of older adults by family members or other trusted persons do occur; the results can be devastating. An injury that would heal quickly and completely in a younger person may result in disability, nursing home placement or even death in a frail, older adult. Battering of older adults is particularly shocking but represents only a small percentage of all forms of elder abuse. In 2009, in Lifespan's Elder Abuse Prevention Program, physical abuse occurred in only nine percent of the 233 cases referred to the program for help.

Financial exploitation, on the other hand, took place in over 43% of cases. Psychological or emotional abuse such as constantly berating older adults, isolation from family and friends or intimidating threats occurred in 32% of cases. It is also common for more than one type of abuse to take place in one case. All forms of elder abuse have potentially serious impacts on the health and well being of older people. Deprivation of medication and food that result from neglect of essential care leave victims at risk for malnutrition and illness. Financial exploitation often results in the loss of assets needed to purchase medication, necessities of life and services essential to remain independent. The stress and isolation of mistreatment contribute to the development of serious depression and anxiety.

Elder abuse also increases the chances of an early death. An important long term study in the US of a large number of abused older adults found that older people who suffered *any form of mistreatment* were three times more likely to die earlier than older adults who were not exposed to elder abuse.

June 15 is World Elder Abuse Awareness Day. The purpose of the day is for societies around the globe to raise awareness about elder mistreatment as a common social problem and to dedicate themselves to preventing abuse of elders. You can participate in World Elder Abuse Awareness Day by becoming alert to the potential abuse of older people in your life.

Older people deserve to live safe and dignified lives. If you have concerns about an older adult being abused in the community, please contact Lifespan's Elder Abuse Prevention Program, at 244-8400. We work together with other aging service programs, law enforcement, the courts and the mental health system to stop the abuse and to keep elders healthy and safe.

Paul L. Caccamise, LMSW, ACSW  
Vice President for Program  
Lifespan

Lifespan, June 2010  
Printed by Finger Lakes Health Magazine