



## How at Risk for Abuse Are People with Dementia?

Elder Abuse is one of the most overlooked public health hazards in the United States. The National Center on Elder Abuse estimates that between one and two million elderly adults have suffered from some form of elder abuse. The main types of elder abuse are physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, neglect and self-neglect, abandonment, and financial exploitation.

Elders with dementia are thought to be at greater risk of abuse and neglect than those of the general elderly population. The following studies looked directly at several questions related to how often people with dementia are abused by their caregivers and what, if any, variables are associated with mistreatment. Citations to the research studies in this fact sheet are shown in parentheses.

**Background:** The number of Americans with Alzheimer's disease is expected to grow exponentially in the coming decades (1).

- Currently, approximately 5.3 million Americans of all ages have Alzheimer's disease – 5.1 million people aged 65 and older, 200,000 people aged under 65.
- Approximately 7.7 million people will have Alzheimer's disease in 2030, and the number will increase to 16 million in 2050.

## Do caregivers fear becoming abusive with person with dementia?

- In one U.S. study, 20% of caregivers expressed fears that they would become violent with the people for whom they cared for (2).

## How often are caregivers abusive to people with dementia?

- Three international studies found overall rates of abuse of people with dementia by their caregivers ranging from 34 to 62% (3, 4 & 5).
- In a U.S. study, caregiver abuse and neglect of people with dementia by their caregivers was detected in 47% of caregivers surveyed (6).
- In a U.S. study, caregiver abuse and neglect of people with dementia was detected in 47.3% of the surveyed caregivers (6).

## What type of abuse is most reported by U.S. caregivers of people with dementia?

- One study shows 60% of caregivers had been verbally abusive with the person for whom they were providing care (7).
- Between 5 and 10% of caregivers reported that they were physically abusive toward the care recipients (6 & 8).
- Fourteen percent of caregivers reported that they were neglectful (6).

## What, if any, characteristics are associated with different kinds and combinations of mistreatment of people with dementia?

### Characteristics associated with mistreatment of people with dementia included:

- The caregiver's anxiety, depressive symptoms, social contacts, perceived burden, emotional status, and role limitations due to emotional problems (6).
- The care recipients's psychological aggression and physical assault behaviors. These behaviors were the best indicators for elder mistreatment as defined by the expert panel convened for this research study. (6)

## References

1. Alzheimer's Association. (2010). 2010 Alzheimer's disease facts and figures.
2. Pillemer, K., & Suitor, J. (1992). Violence and violent feelings: What causes them among family caregivers? *The Journal of Gerontology*, 47(4), S165-S172.
3. Cooney, C., Howard, R., & Lawlor, B. (2006). Abuse of vulnerable people with dementia by their carers: Can we identify those most at risk? *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 21, 564-571.
4. Cooper, C., Selwood, A., Blanchard, M., Walker, Z., Blizard, G., and Livingston, G. (2009). Abuse of people with dementia by family carers: Representative cross sectional survey. *British Medical Journal*, 339(7694), 1-5.
5. Yan, E., & Kwok, T. (2010). Abuse of older Chinese with dementia by family caregivers: An inquiry into the role of caregiver burden. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, doi:10.1002/gps.2561
6. A. Wiglesworth, A, Mosqueda, L, Mulnard, R, et al. (2010), Screening for Abuse and Neglect of People with Dementia. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, Volume 58, Issue 3, 493–500.
7. VandeWeerd, C. V., & Paveza, G. J. (2005). Verbal mistreatment in older adults: A look at persons with Alzheimer's disease and their caregivers in the State of Florida. *Journal of Elder Abuse*, 17(4), 11-30.
8. Paveza, G. J., Cohen, D., Eisdorfer, C., Freels, S., Semla, T., Ashford, J. W., et al. (1992). Severe family violence and Alzheimer's disease: Prevalence and risk factors. *The Gerontologist*, 32(4), 493-97.