

NATIONAL CENTER ON ELDER ABUSE

Red Flags of Elder Abuse

OPIOID USE



Experts believe that the incidence of elder mistreatment has grown with the rising opioid epidemic.¹ Older people commonly experience chronic health conditions and associated pain for which opioids are prescribed. Mounting reports of opioid misuse have been documented among elders addicted to drugs and their adult children who steal their medication. Though there is little data to quantify the breadth of the problem, reported incidents of opioid misuse often result in financial exploitation and may be accompanied by other, co-occurring forms of mistreatment such as emotional abuse and physical harm. Despite the complexity of this issue, opioid-related elder abuse is an injustice that we can address and prevent. Health care professionals, in particular, must be aware of the signs of abuse to identify mistreatment and intervene to avert harm to their older patients.

Red Flags of Opioid-Related Elder Abuse

- E**vading questions about daily use of narcotics
- L**osing or having medications stolen
- D**isplaying a decrease in functional capacity despite improvements in pain
- E**xhibiting unusual changes in behavior or physical appearance
- R**equesting particular medications claiming others are ineffective
- A**ctively pushing boundaries of chronic pain protocol structure
- B**ackground of self-medication with prescription and illicit drugs
- U**sing multiple prescribers and pharmacies
- S**eeking refills before schedule refill date
- E**xceeding opioid dosage without physician approval

¹Roberto, K. A., Teaster, P. B., Lindberg, B. W., & Blancato, R. (2020). A first [and disturbing] look at the relationship between the opioid epidemic and elder abuse: Insights of human service professionals. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 0733464820947279.

TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS

- Stay updated on the risks of opioids, how and when it is appropriate to prescribe them, and appropriate alternatives to pain management.
- Educate patients and family members about the risk of abuse.
- Regularly check your state's [Prescription Drug Monitoring Program \(PDMP\)](#) for prescription histories and always check prior to issuing new prescriptions.

Report suspected abuse in the community to **Adult Protective Services** and suspected abuse in long-term care facilities to the **Long-Term Care Ombudsman**. In the event of emergency, call **911**.

To connect to a local or state reporting number, contact the Eldercare Locator at eldercare.acl.gov or at **1-800-677-1116**.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- [Administration for Community Living Elder Justice Projects](#)
- American Geriatrics Society – [Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program](#)
- [American Hospital Association](#)
- [Management of Pain in Older Adults](#) – free CEU training for medical providers
- [National Center on Elder Abuse](#)
- National Institutes of Health – [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#)
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#)
National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- US Department of Health and Human Services –
[Pain Management Best Practices Inter-Agency Task Force Report](#)
- What I Should Know About Opioid Pain Medicine: Fact Sheet
[English](#) | [Spanish](#)

