

Aging Network's Role in Identifying Malnutrition and Abuse

It is important for all of us to prevent malnutrition in our communities before it occurs. The aging network, especially those in the field providing direct services to older adults, can act as first responders for their communities. It is imperative to know what steps to take if we see signs of malnutrition and/or may be experiencing abuse or neglect.

Prevalence of Malnutrition

As many as one out of every two older adults is malnourished or at risk of becoming malnourished.¹ Malnutrition can lead to poor outcomes such as chronic illness, muscle loss and frailty, increase in falls, and loss of independence.²

CAUSES

Malnutrition is caused by too much, too little, or an imbalance of protein, calories, or other nutrients which lead to adverse effects on a person's body and how it functions. Several factors can contribute to malnutrition including:

- Disease
- Neglect
- Reduced physical and/or cognitive function
- Hunger and food insecurity
- Economic barriers
- Social and mental health, such as social isolation and depression³

RED FLAGS

Malnutrition has many warning signs, including unexpected weight loss, loss of appetite, inability to eat or only eat small amounts, feeling weak or tired, and swelling or fluid retention.

1 [National Blueprint: Achieving Quality Malnutrition Care for Older Adults, 2020 Update.](#)

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

Is Malnutrition a Result of Elder Abuse and Neglect?

Elder abuse is defined as any knowing, intentional, or negligent act by a caregiver or another person that causes harm or serious risk for harm to an older adult.⁴ Malnutrition that is the result of abuse or neglect, can be challenging to identify. However, it is important to keep in mind that these potential signs of abuse or neglect can sometimes suggest other factors that are unrelated to maltreatment:

Behavioral and Emotional



Unusual or sudden changes in personality or behavior



Depression, agitation, fear, or anxiety



Lack of responsiveness, withdrawal from others, or isolation

Physical and Environmental



Weight loss or gain



Change in appearance of skin



Unexplained injuries



Hair or tooth loss



Bruising, especially on arms and face



Poor sanitation and hygiene



Missing or not using medical aids
(e.g., eyeglasses, walker, dentures, medications, hearing aid)



Items piling up in the home (e.g., mail, meal/food packages, other clutter)

⁴ [Subtitle B – Elder Justice Act.](#)

What can you do?

To ensure we all have access to leading a full life within our communities we can know how to identify and report possible neglect.

Identify Malnutrition⁵

Your agency or organization can work to identify malnutrition by:

- Using information gathered with the DETERMINE checklist (for example, the DETERMINE Questions Pathway tool⁶) and consider adding a validated malnutrition screening tool to your organization's intake process and other service-related assessment processes.^{7,8}
- Addressing the root causes by providing appropriate services and referrals.
- Monitoring client progress and the quality of services delivered.
- If abuse or neglect is suspected, implementing agency policy and procedures.

Identify Abuse or Neglect

If you suspect abuse or neglect, follow the appropriate policy and procedures developed by your agency or organization. Examples of these policy and procedures include:

- Speaking with your immediate supervisor.
- In appropriate circumstances, engaging the older adult in a private conversation.
- Depending on your state, some nutrition professionals may be mandatory reporters. Learn more about [mandatory reporter requirements](#) by state.
- Use the [Eldercare Locator website](#) or call **1-800-677-1116** to report to your local APS or the LTC Ombudsman (if the person lives in a long-term care setting). If you suspect immediate danger, call 911. Learn more about the signs of [elder abuse](#) and [reporting abuse](#).

CONCLUSION

Local senior nutrition providers can identify abuse and neglect among the people they serve with person-centered, culturally sensitive, and trauma-informed approaches. By addressing malnutrition appropriately, the aging network can promote the health and wellbeing of older adults.

⁵ Addressing Malnutrition in Community Living Older Adults: A Toolkit for Area Agencies on Aging.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Greater Wisconsin Area Agency on Aging DETERMINE Questions Pathway Checklist.

⁸ Addressing Malnutrition in Community Living Older Adults: A Toolkit for Area Agencies on Aging.

