What is self-neglect?

Self-neglect is a term used to describe an older adult living in a way that puts their health and safety at risk. It occurs when an older adult refuses or fails to attend to basic necessities such as food, water, clothing, shelter, personal hygiene, medication, or safety precautions. Self-neglect can also include refusing needed support or help with daily activities.

Self-neglect often occurs in conjunction with others issues such as alcohol or drug addiction, depression, anxiety, or changes in cognition (e.g. dementia).

Signs of self-neglect include:

The older adult
- Dehydration or malnutrition
- Untreated medical conditions
- Poor personal hygiene (dirty hair, nails, skin)
- Smells of urine or feces
- Wandering unaccompanied in cold weather or being found late at night or in unsafe situations
- Not taking medications as prescribed
- Wearing clothes that are dirty, soiled, or not suited for the weather
- Skin rashes or bed sores
- Increasingly confused or disorientated.
- Allowing a stranger entry into their home
- Gambling which impacts their finances and daily living routine

The home
- Spoiled food or not enough nutritious food
- Filth, bad odours, hazardous (e.g. improper electrical wiring), unsafe or unsanitary living conditions (failing to take out garbage, shutting off water or power)
- Animal or insect infestation
- Hoarding (e.g. stacks of papers)
- Sometimes the older adult is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless because they have inadvertently given their money away or spent it on non-essential items.
- Home takeovers – where a stranger moves in with the older adult claiming to be a friend and then they won’t leave.
Common characteristics of older adults who neglect themselves
• Living alone
• Isolated
• Depressed
• Cognitive changes or decline
• Frail or advanced age
• Alcohol or drug problems
• Higher risk of falls, injury, and medication abuse
• Financial mismanagement

Older adults who neglect themselves often live alone. Isolation and depression are common with self-neglect.

Prevention and staying safe: Tips to share with the older adult
• Take care of your health and seek help for any alcohol, drug or mental health concerns.
• Stay active in the community and connected to family and friends.
• If you or someone you know is being neglected, or you are concerned about an older person’s self-neglect, talk to someone you trust such a doctor, a social service worker, or family and friends.

What can families, friends, neighbors, and service providers do to help?
• Learn what signs to look for, and stay alert to changes that may indicate a problem with a vulnerable older adult.
• Help the adult reduce his or her isolation as much as possible and stay in contact.
• Talk to and work with the older adult. Sometimes reaching out with care and concerns opens the door to a discussion about finding solutions or getting support.
• Call 911 if the person needs immediate medical attention or is in danger of immediate harm. If you notice a self-neglecting older adult has had a sudden change in cognition, including hallucinations or delusions, they may be experiencing a delirium which is a medical emergency.

How can Adult Protection assist?
• You can call Adult Protection and confidentially report your concern about an older adult who is self-neglecting. Adult protection is mandated to respond.
• Your identity as the reporter is kept confidential. You may also choose to report your concern anonymously.
• Adult protection will offer support to the older adult to help ensure his or her safety.
• If the person is not capable of understanding and appreciating the risk of harm to their health and safety, Adult Protection may intervene to help protect the older adult.

Everyone deserves to be treated with respect and dignity
You are not alone — help and support are available
Seniors’ Services/Adult Protection Unit
phone 456-3946; toll-free 1-800-661-0408, ext. 3946

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