A Guide to Identifying Abuse and Neglect for the DENTAL TEAM

Sponsored by the Massachusetts Dental Society Access, Prevention, and Interprofessional Relations Committee
You Can Help

Studies conclusively state that health care professionals who acknowledge that abuse has occurred have a positive impact on their patients. Validating the seriousness of the abuse helps victims move toward safety. The dental team’s role in combating abuse and neglect includes recognition and referral. By being observant and reporting suspected cases, you can help shield your patients, both young and old, from violence and neglect.

The Massachusetts Dental Society Access, Prevention, and Interprofessional Relations Committee is committed to providing information regarding the dentist’s obligation as a mandated reporter to report abuse and neglect and to develop educational and informational materials to address this growing problem.
Violence occurs in every community and in every neighborhood regardless of age, education, or financial well-being. For the most part, it is a silent cycle of physical and emotional abuse that leaves victims feeling helpless and hopeless.

With 75 percent of physical abuse cases resulting in injuries to the head, neck, and/or mouth, the dental community is in a fundamental position to be the first advocates for victims of abuse and neglect. The Massachusetts Dental Society Access, Prevention, and Interprofessional Relations Committee has created this guide to assist the dental community in recognizing and reporting suspected cases of abuse and neglect among children, the elderly, victims of domestic violence, and the developmentally disabled and physically challenged.

According to Massachusetts law, abuse is defined as the non-accidental act by a caretaker which causes a substantial risk of physical or emotional injury; or constitutes a sexual offense under the laws of the Commonwealth. Neglect is defined as failure by a caretaker, either deliberately or through negligence, or an inability to take actions necessary to provide an individual with minimally adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, supervision, emotional stability and growth, or other essential care.

When a victim reveals information about being abused, report it immediately to the appropriate local social service agency, which is equipped to investigate and handle such cases. Intervention should be handled by professionally-trained counselors with knowledge in support and guidance techniques. However, if you feel your patient is in immediate danger, call 911.

SafeLink 24-Hour Domestic Violence Hotline (877) 785-2020

The National Domestic Violence Hotline(800) 799-SAFE (7233)
Neglect is an act of omission, whether it is willful or accidental. It may be difficult to see and define. One must look not only at the parent/caretaker role but also at the actual capabilities of the child, elder or disabled adult. Poverty, substance abuse, and domestic violence can play a role.

Child neglect is by far the most prevalent form of child maltreatment - greater than all other types of child maltreatment combined.

Neglect is organized into five areas —

- **Physical**
  Basic needs of food, shelter, clean body, and environment
- **Medical**
  Not seeking or following through with appointments
- **Emotional**
  May exhibit self-destructive behavior, serious emotional disturbance
- **Educational**
  Habitual absence from school, barren environment
- **Supervisinal**
  Left with dangerous caretaker or no adult in charge

The dental team’s role is to be observant and report suspected cases. You can help shield your patients, both young and old, from violence and neglect by taking action.

**Report any reasonable suspicion of abuse and neglect.**

Dentists are mandated reporters

Under Massachusetts law, mandated reporters are protected from liability in any civil or criminal action and from any discriminatory or retaliatory actions by an employer.
Overall Assessment

Prior to any dental treatment or exam, a member of the dental team can subtly perform an overall assessment of the child, adult, or senior to determine if the patient is a possible victim of abuse. Here are some guidelines to follow:

- If possible, observe patients walking into your office and how they behave in the waiting area.
- Does the patient appear to be in pain as he or she walks into the operatory or sits in the dental chair? A victim who has fractured bones or ribs may have hindered movement.
- Does the patient seem uncomfortable as he or she sits down? This may indicate sexual abuse.
- Is there swelling or bruising around the face?
- Do hands reveal any type of trauma such as burns from cigarettes, lighters, or “glove-like” burns from scalding water?
- When the patient is in the chair, observe his or her head to detect if there’s any swelling of the scalp from trauma or fracture. Are there bald spots where hair was traumatically removed or pulled?
- Are there oval-shaped abrasions or lacerations that indicate bite marks?
- Does the patient appear to be overdressed for the current weather? For example, is he or she wearing long sleeves, long pants, and other heavy clothing during hot summer months? This may be an attempt to cover bruises or injuries to the arms and legs.
- Is the patient dirty, disheveled, or appear malnourished?
- Was there an obvious delay in seeking dental treatment?
Child Abuse crosses all ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic lines. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services (data released January 2016), Massachusetts reported the highest rate of abused and neglected children in the nation. In 2014 alone, 31,863 children in Massachusetts (this is almost double the number of seats in the Boston Garden) were confirmed as abused or neglected.

As mandated reporters, every dentist plays a critical role in protecting children from suspected cases of abuse and neglect. Learning to recognize the signs and document and report them to the appropriate authorities are crucial steps to preventing more serious, permanent injuries, or even fatalities from occurring.

Signs of Child Abuse

- Are there lacerations or scars from trauma or rope marks in the corners of the mouth from a gag being forced into the mouth?
- View the palate for unexplained bruises that may suggest forced oral sex. Contusions on the floor of the mouth may be indicative of sexual abuse, too. (Nearly 80 percent of sexually abused children know their abuser.)
- Are there any teeth missing for no apparent reason? Is the labial frenum lacerated from forced feeding or as a result of blunt trauma from a hand or instrument?
- Are there burns in the mouth from scalding liquids or chemicals? Does the child have difficulty swallowing or salivate excessively?
- Do X-rays show a healed or a recently fractured tooth?

Another important step in identifying and reporting abuse and neglect is conducting and documenting interviews with suspected victims.
Interviewing a Suspected Victim of Child Abuse

- If you suspect abuse, try to speak to the child with a member of your staff present, but without the child’s family member(s) or guardian in the room. This way, the child is more likely to speak freely without fear.

- Ask the child non-threatening questions that require a descriptive answer rather than just a “yes” or “no” answer. For example, “How did you knock your tooth out?” Do not suggest answers or pressure the child for answers to questions he or she is unwilling to answer.

- Establish a trusting environment for the child and try to use his or her own words and terms while discussing the situation. Young children do not typically make up stories of abuse. However, they may not volunteer information, fearing they will be separated from the parent or that there will be retaliation from the parent or guardian.

- Is the child’s explanation consistent with the parent’s explanation?

Interviewing the Parent or Guardian

- Interview the parent separately from the child with a witness present.

- Tell the parent the reason for the interview, attempt to be objective, discuss your concerns regarding the child’s injury, and reassure the parent of your support.

- Do not attempt to prove abuse or neglect. A non-abusive parent is usually willing to openly discuss the child’s injury and provide all details when questioned.

- Determine if the parent’s story conflicts with the child’s story before making your determination to report the case to the appropriate authorities.

To report suspected child abuse or neglect in Massachusetts, you must first file an oral report by calling the Child-at-Risk Hotline at (800) 792-5200 to notify the appropriate personnel of the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF).

In addition, a written report must be submitted to DCF within 48 hours after the oral report has been filed. Refer to your local office who will provide you with directions on filing your written report. If you suspect a child is in immediate danger, call 911.

Child-at-Risk Hotline (800) 792-5200
Elder Abuse

With our aging population increasing, the problem of elder abuse has become more widespread. Every year, more than one million older Americans are the victims of elder abuse. The most recent statistics available in 2009, which reflect the Massachusetts Department of Elder Affairs, received more than 16,000 reports of elder abuse.

Elder abuse and neglect refers to any act that threatens the safety and well-being of an older person. This may include physical, emotional, sexual, or financial abuse, as well as neglect. In a number of these cases, dentists can serve as a senior’s first line of defense.

Signs of Elder Abuse

• Lip trauma
• Fractured, loose, or missing teeth
• Injuries, such as bruising to the eye and surrounding soft and hard tissues
• Ill fitting dentures, lack of dental care, or lack of physical hygiene

Other Signs of Elder Abuse May Include

• Confinement or isolation of the individual
• Being withdrawn or passive
• Depression, agitation, or anxiety
• Unexpected large withdrawals from financial accounts or abrupt changes in the elders Last Will and Testament or unpaid dental bills
Under Massachusetts law, dentists are mandated reporters of any suspected abuse, neglect, or mistreatment of an elder and must make a verbal report to the Elder Abuse Hotline at (800) 922-2275.

A written report is required within 48 hours of a verbal report. Refer to your local office who will provide you with directions on filing your written report. If you feel an elderly patient is in immediate danger, call 911.

Elder Abuse Hotline (800) 922-2275
Developmentally Disabled and Physically Challenged

Advocates for developmentally and physically challenged people estimate that individuals with disabilities are four to 10 times more likely to be the victims of abuse and neglect than people without disabilities.

Victims include men, women, and children of all ages who suffer from various types of disabilities including down syndrome, autism, alzheimer's, cerebral palsy, and paraplegia. The abuse and neglect can take all forms, including sexual and physical abuse and financial exploitation. Often, a person the individual knows and trusts, such as a relative, a caregiver, or staff person, commits the abuse where the victim resides. Most cases of physical and sexual abuse against challenged individuals happen to those who have an intellectual disability, with women being particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Sadly, many abuse and neglect victims with disabilities continually suffer in silence because they are unable to communicate their abuse. As a result, dental health professionals are in an advantageous position to identify the signs of abuse and neglect by reviewing the information on children and elders in this brochure. However, some additional signs of abuse and neglect among the disabled may include:

- Patient lacks needed dentures, eyeglasses, hearing aid, walker, or wheelchair.
- There is evidence of dehydration indicated by dry, fragile skin; dry, sore mouth; apathy or lack of energy; and/or mental confusion.
- Patient has bedsores or skin rashes related to an unchanged bed.
- Caregiver refuses to apply for economic aid or services and resists outside help.
- Caregiver is unreasonably dissatisfied with patient's treatment and frequently changes dentists and/or other service providers.
If you suspect a developmentally or physically challenged patient may be a victim of abuse and neglect, you are mandated to report it by calling the Disabled Persons Protection Commission Hotline at (800) 426-9009 to file a report. A written report is required within 48 hours of a verbal report. Refer to your local office who will provide you with directions on filing your written report. However, if you feel a developmentally or physically challenged patient is in immediate danger, call 911.

Under Massachusetts law, dentists are mandated reporters of any suspected abuse or neglect on a person with a disability.

Disabled Persons Protection Hotline (800) 426-9009
WHEN IN DOUBT, REPORT.

Abuse and Neglect Hotlines

SafeLink 24-Hour Domestic Violence  
(877) 785-2020

National Domestic Violence  
(800) 799-SAFE (7233)

Child-at-Risk  
(800) 792-5200

Elder Abuse  
(800) 922-2275

Disabled Persons Protection  
(800) 426-9009

Failure to Report

In Massachusetts, mandated reporters can be fined up to $1,000 for failure to report incidences of suspected abuse and neglect of children, elders, and individuals with disabilities. Any mandated reporter who willfully fails to report child abuse and/or neglect that resulted in serious bodily injury or death can be punished by a fine of up to $5,000 and up to two and one half years in jail, and be reported to the Board of Registration in Dentistry.