

Guide for service providers: **understanding and responding to physical abuse**

What is physical abuse?

Physical abuse is any intentional act that causes physical pain, injury, trauma, or bodily harm to another person. It includes both acts and threats of physical violence.

Who may be at increased risk

- Older people
- People living with disability
- People who rely on others for care or support
- People experiencing isolation, mental health issues, or cognitive changes

What physical abuse can look like

Physical abuse can take many forms, including:

- hitting, slapping, punching, or kicking
- grabbing, shoving, or pushing
- burning, biting, or pinching
- force-feeding or withholding food
- inappropriate use of restraints (physical or chemical)
- rough handling during care or transport
- misuse of medication to sedate or control
- deliberate exposure to danger, injury, or extreme temperature.



How to identify signs of physical abuse

Some signs may be visible, others more subtle. Be alert to:

Physical signs:

- Unexplained bruises, cuts, burns, or fractures
- Injuries in various stages of healing
- Injuries inconsistent with the explanation given
- Restraint marks or finger marks
- Signs of over-medication or sedation

Behavioural signs:

- Flinching, withdrawal, or fearfulness
- Anxiety or distress around specific people
- Hesitation to speak, or non-verbal cues of discomfort
- Sudden changes in behaviour, mood, or physical ability

Situational clues:

- A carer who is controlling, aggressive, or unwilling to allow private conversations
- Delay in seeking medical help for injuries
- History of multiple injuries


What to do if you suspect physical abuse

Assess the risk. Is the adult in immediate danger or at risk of significant harm?

- Yes → call:

 **000** (emergency services)

- Unsure → discuss with your manager or supervisor immediately.

 **Tip:** If the person is in immediate danger, you should first ensure safety before proceeding with any other steps.

If you are an NDIS provider or aged care worker:

- Report internally according to your organisation's safeguarding or incident management policy.

Consider whether to make a report to:

- **NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission** (if person is an NDIS participant)
- **Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission** (if person is in aged care).
- **South Australia Police (SAPOL)** (if concerns are serious)

Consider whether you should share information in line with Information Sharing Guidelines.

Work with the adult to plan next steps

- Ensure the person's and your own immediate safety and consider whether any medical attention is required.
- If safe to do so, speak with the adult alone and sensitively raise the concerns, and ask them what support they want to address the abuse, for example:
 - » help the person to make a report to the police
 - » help the person to make a safety plan
 - » refer the person to a service that can assist with seeking an intervention order (refer to the **Contacts for Safeguarding Assistance Information Sheet** for more information about who to contact).
- Speak with your manager about the situation and consider your agency's safeguarding policies and incident management procedures.
- Document your concerns factually and clearly.



If you are unsure the Adult Safeguarding Unit can provide free, confidential information, advice and support.

A copy of the **Contacts for Safeguarding Assistance Information Sheet** is available for agencies.

Contact us:



1800 372 310

(weekdays 9:00am to 4:00pm)



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Remember: safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Your actions can protect a person from ongoing harm and help restore their dignity, rights, and safety.



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