

# Health and Welfare Alert

Ohio Administrative Code 5123:2-17-02 requires all developmental disabilities employees to review Health and Welfare Alerts released by the department as part of annual training. All previous alerts are listed on the department's website.

## Preventing and Reporting Abuse #61-2-17

This alert provides critical information to caregivers about physical and sexual abuse. Often, people with developmental disabilities rely on caregivers for physical assistance, have difficulty communicating, or may access services in an area in which oversight is limited. Those are all factors which contribute to a higher risk for physical and sexual abuse faced by people with developmental disabilities than in the general population.<sup>1</sup>

### This alert is required reading

In addition to required annual training to identify and report Major Unusual Incidents (MUIs) and Unusual Incidents (UIs), all developmental disabilities employees are required by Ohio Administrative Code 5123:2-17-02 to review Health and Welfare Alerts released by the department.

This includes all Health and Welfare Alerts beginning the month annual training is completed, through the preceding calendar year. All previous Health and Welfare Alerts are available on the department's website.

### What is abuse?

The MUI Rule (OAC 5123:2-17-02) defines physical abuse as using physical force that results in physical harm, including hitting, slapping, pushing, or throwing objects at someone.

Sexual abuse is defined as unlawful sexual conduct or sexual contact, and includes things such as watching someone get dressed or undressed without their permission, touching someone or forcing them to touch another person inappropriately, or repeatedly making sexual comments or gestures that make someone uncomfortable.

Designed to be accessible to the widest possible audience, *Abuse, An Easy Read Guide* offers a way to have a conversation about abuse.



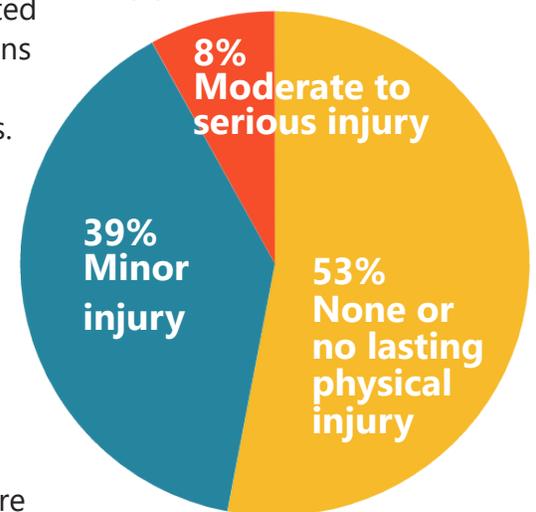
### How common is abuse?

In 2016, more than 1,400 allegations of physical abuse were reported to the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities Major Unusual Incident Registry Unit.

Of those, more than 400 or 29 percent of allegations were substantiated based on a preponderance of evidence, meaning that there was enough evidence that investigators could rule that abuse had likely occurred.

Physical injuries that resulted from the 400 substantiated abuse allegations ranged from none to serious.

*Severity of injury from 400 substantiated allegations ranged from none to serious.*



There were more than 300 reported allegations of sexual abuse, and 25 percent of them were substantiated.

In most of those cases, the abuser was someone who the person participating in services knew, such as a father, sister, friend, a long-time paid support or significant other.

<sup>1</sup> Sobsey, D., D. Wells, R. Lucardie, and S. Mansell. 1995. *Violence and Disability: An Annotated Bibliography*. Baltimore, MD. Brookes Publishing

## How can I tell if someone is being abused?

Telling someone about an abusive experience or abusive relationship can be traumatic. A person experiencing abuse may be afraid they won't be taken seriously or will be blamed, or they may be afraid of threats the abuser made to keep them from telling anyone.

People with developmental disabilities may face additional challenges talking about abuse:

- if they communicate differently, or typically without using words.
- if they do not see the experience as abuse, even if they know the experience is something they don't like or don't want to happen again.
- if they don't understand that they have the right to live free from abuse.

It is important that caregivers be able to recognize the signs of abuse and know how to report them.

### **Signs of abuse**

Some signs of abuse may be more obvious than others. Things such as unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, black eyes or other untreated injuries may be easy to spot. The person may seem frightened of certain people or situations, or refuse to go with the abuser. They may have difficulty walking or standing.

Other signs may be more subtle. It may take someone who really knows the person to notice things such as sudden depression, anxiety, anger or aggression, or changes in appetite or weight.

People experiencing abuse may report frequent stomachaches or headaches, or have trouble focusing at work or school. They may feel a loss of confidence or have new fears. They may become withdrawn or talk to friends and family less than usual.

### **Signs of sexual abuse**

- Torn or stained underwear or sheets
- Nightmares, trouble sleeping, sudden bed-wetting
- Dressing in layers of clothing
- A new resistance to being touched
- Unexplained gifts or money
- Displaying a new sexual knowledge
- Desperately seeking affection from others

## If I think someone is being abused, what should I do?

Everyone who works with people with a developmental disability is a mandated reporter.

That means independent providers, agency staff and county board of developmental disabilities staff are all required to report if they have reason to believe a person has been harmed or is at risk.

**DO** take the person seriously, even if it seems unlikely to you that abuse has occurred.

**DO** report the abuse to the local police, the county board of developmental disabilities and local children's services board if the person is under 18.

**DO** report as soon as possible. Reporting must occur within four hours. Use that time to make the person feel safe and remove them from contact with the abuser.

**DO NOT** use language that blames the victim, such as, "You should have," or "Why didn't you."

**DO NOT** delay reporting abuse by investigating further. Investigative agents and law enforcement must conduct any investigation. The agent will conduct the MUI investigation upon report.

**DO NOT** wait to get the person medical attention.

---

There may be other signs that abuse is taking place that are not listed here. If you have a concern, the best thing to do is to make a report.



Call your county board of developmental disabilities to report a concern.



Call DODD Abuse and Neglect Hotline  
1-866-313-6733, Option 1  
8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday



Report online at [dodd.ohio.gov](http://dodd.ohio.gov).

For questions about abuse or other MUIs,  
call the MUI Registry Unit at (614)-995-3810.