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4 Common Elder Scams: How to Stay Safe and Fight Back

By Devin Kropp

Elder fraud continues to be a growing problem with millions falling victim to a scam every year. Know the common signs that signal trickery—and what to do if you or a loved one is being scammed.

Over two million elderly people are known to fall victim to elder fraud every year. The elderly population has long been a target of fraud for many reasons. For one, many are trusting and may have decreased cognition stemming from health issues. Scammers are also aware that many of these people have retirement accounts with money to spare—or conversely, are on a budget and likely to jump on a chance at a windfall.

Experts believe, however, that many more elderly victims go unreported. Some may not realize the fraud until a family member or caregiver steps in. Many are embarrassed when they discover they have been duped and so they hide the events. The median amount lost by victims over 80 years old is \$1,700.

It can be difficult to detect when you are being victimized. There are many types of scams that are targeted at the elderly, and awareness is the first step in protecting yourself or loved ones. Here are some of the most common elder scams and tips on how to combat them.

1. MEDICARE AND SOCIAL SECURITY SCAMS

Scammers misrepresent these government programs to trick elderly victims into sharing personal information. In some cases, they may pretend to be a Medicare representative and ask for the victim's information and Medicare number, which is then used to commit fraud. In other cases, they may ask for bank account information and steal money from the account.

The same has happened with Social Security—many scammers pose as representatives who promise to improve benefits. They may ask the victim for money for these services or may simply extract enough information to have the benefits deposited into the scammers' accounts.

What to do: It is important to know that Medicare and Social Security will never call you to sell you anything. The agencies will also not contact you for personal information unless you have called them first. If you are unsure about a call, hang up and call the agencies directly. Also, be sure to check Medicare and Social Security statements regularly for anything unusual.

2. SWEETHEART SCAMS

Unfortunately many lonely or widowed elderly people fall victim to sweetheart scams every year. Here, scammers pose as a love interest online. They form a relationship with the victim virtually, expressing their love...and then ask for money. Since the relationship is already established and the victim sees this person as a boyfriend or girlfriend, they often send the cash. By the time a family member intervenes or the elderly person realizes their paramour is a fake, it is very difficult to get the money back. Often the amount of money sent can total thousands of dollars.

What to do: If you meet someone online, it is important to find out if they are who they say they are. It is a red flag if an online friend does not want to meet in person or use video chat. If you think a loved one has fallen victim to this scam, be empathetic and try to ask more questions. Asking for power of attorney can grant you easier access to their accounts so you can check for anything suspicious.

3. GRANDPARENT SCAMS

A popular scam directed at the older generation is the grandparent scam, where an imposter calls pretending to be the victims' grandchild or someone holding the grandchild hostage. They demand a ransom in return for the grandchild being let go. Often, the grandparent immediately transfers the money to make sure their grandchild is safe before they realize it was a scam. Reports have found this scam makes the most money on average for the scammer—nearly \$9,000.

What to do: If you receive a phone call like this, the first thing to do is try to remain calm. While the thought of a grandchild being in trouble is frightening, it is important to confirm the situation. Before you send any money, try calling the grandchild or the parent directly to see if they are in trouble. If you discover that the call is a scam, report the phone number to your local police. If you do send money and later discover the fraud, file a police report.

4. PHISHING AND TELEMARKETING SCAMS

More generally, elderly people are often victims of various phishing and telemarketing scams. Whether they are via email or over the phone, these scams usually ask victims to share personal information such as name, address, birthdate, banking information, and more. The scammers can then use this information to impersonate the victim or steal funds. Elderly people who are not comfortable with the computer may be quick to click on malicious links that download malware or expose information.

What to do: If you receive a phone call asking for personal information, think twice before sharing.

If you are unsure, hang up and call the institution directly. When using email, do not click on any links or open attachments in an unsolicited email. Even if you think you know the sender, think twice before you click. If you are concerned about a loved one being scammed, educate them on how to check emails for fraudulent links.

STAY SAFE

The first step in protecting yourself is understanding that these scams exist. Awareness allows you to think twice before taking action on a phone call or email. If you believe you may be a victim of a scam, confide in a family member or friend you trust. You

should contact your local law enforcement as well. Remember, these scams are designed to trick you, so do not be embarrassed.

If you care for a loved one that you think may have been scammed, approach the topic in a calm and understanding way. The victim may feel defensive or embarrassed, so it is important to be mindful. Again, contact law enforcement and the victim's bank if any money was moved. Be sure to share some of the common scams with them as a preventative method.

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