



Self-Defense for Seniors: Must-Know Info About How to Protect Yourself

June 18, 2020

Everyone deserves to feel secure. That's why self-defense for seniors is such an important topic. As people age, their bodies tend to get slower and weaker, which can make them vulnerable to attacks by criminals. Fortunately, there are a variety of good tactics that older adults can learn in order to protect themselves.

The sad reality is that some people do prey on seniors. A U.S. Department of Justice report noted that between 2003 and 2013, 93 percent of all crimes against people over age 65 were property crimes such as burglary and theft.

And even though seniors and the elderly experience lower rates of violent crime than those in other age groups, the report showed that over the same time period, the rate of violent crime against people over 65 increased by 27 percent.

This article will help you understand different types of self-defense training that are available (including martial arts and cane self-defense) and how such training can benefit your health and well-being. You'll learn about steps you can take to avoid becoming a target and discover basic techniques for defending yourself if you do end up in a dangerous situation. You'll also read about important factors to consider before turning to a firearm for your defense.

Benefits of Self-Defense Training

Age and physical limitations do not have to prevent you from learning how to protect yourself. Whether you study basic self-defense techniques or pursue advanced martial arts training, knowing that you're capable of defending yourself can be a great confidence booster. And when you feel (and look) confident, you show the world that you are not weak or vulnerable. That can potentially deter would-be aggressors and keep you from having to defend yourself at all.

Self-defense training teaches you how to stay aware of your surroundings and focus on your safety. You will learn to recognize where potential attackers could be lurking and where you could go to escape. You will also learn how to prepare for the unexpected and how to quickly disable an assailant if necessary. With practice, you can develop the reactions that are required to protect yourself in an emergency.

Such training also brings a host of physical benefits: You can improve your balance, coordination, stamina, strength, and flexibility. Even if you never have to use the techniques you learn in class, the exercise you get through self-defense training can have a positive impact on your overall health.





Safety Tips: How to Avoid Being Targeted

Prevention should always be your primary objective. After all, the best way to stay safe is to not get into dicey situations in the first place.

Did you know that your body language and mannerisms can give off signals that make you more likely to be a target for criminals? In one famous study, researchers recorded more than 60 people walking along a busy New York City street. Then, they showed the video to a group of prison inmates who had been convicted of assaulting strangers. The prisoners were asked to identify the people on the video who would make the most desirable targets.

The inmates were remarkably consistent in their choices. It turned out that age, size, and gender were not the deciding factors. Instead, the criminals selected victims who dragged their feet and moved awkwardly, who were slumped over, and who kept their eyes on the ground. Those people were perceived as being easy to overpower.

If you can exhibit confidence and self-assurance, a potential attacker may decide you're not the easy mark he or she was hoping for. To

avoid appearing vulnerable, try following these tips:

- **Be alert and aware of your surroundings.** Developing the habit of scanning the area around you will help you spot potential threats and allow you to avoid them.
- **Stand straight and keep your chin up and your shoulders back.** A hunched posture and a lowered gaze will make you seem fearful and timid.
- **Walk smoothly and fluidly to convey confidence.** If possible, keep the same pace as the pedestrians around you.
- **Make brief eye contact with the people around you** to demonstrate that you are aware of them (but don't stare or act aggressively). If a potential assailant knows you have seen him or her, the advantage of surprise disappears.
- **Don't talk on your phone or stare at a map while out walking.** Doing so indicates that you aren't paying attention to what's going on around you. Plan your route before you leave your home, hotel, or other point of origin; if you need assistance, step into a store and ask a clerk to help you.
- **Don't let a potential attacker distract you.** If a stranger asks you for the time, don't stop and look down at your watch. Instead, keep walking and raise your watch up to your eye level in order to keep the person in your line of sight.
- **Stick to well-lit and populated areas at night.** It's also a good idea to keep a mini flashlight and whistle on your key ring and keep the keys in your hand (with one key sticking out between your fingers) while you're walking.
- **Don't draw attention to yourself.** Keep valuables out of sight and don't wear expensive clothes or flashy jewelry. If you use a purse, carry it close to you and don't let it dangle too far from your body. You might even want to conceal your purse under your jacket or coat.

Basic Techniques to Fend Off an Attack

Even if you do your best to prevent becoming a target of crime, you still might end up in a dangerous situation. So it's important to know how to stay safe and defend yourself.

Always remember that self-preservation is the ultimate goal. So if a thief demands your money or personal property, especially if he or she is wielding a weapon, give it to him or her. **Nothing in your pockets or purse is worth more than your life.** If you have no easy way to escape, it's far better to just give the mugger what

he or she wants so that he or she will leave you alone. If you're able to do so, keep a safe distance from the thief by tossing your valuables in his or her direction rather than handing them over at close range.

Sometimes, however, a physical confrontation is unavoidable. You typically have just a few seconds to make a move, so you need to be prepared. These tips can help you better protect yourself if you end up in such a situation:

1. **Make noise.**

Shout, blow a whistle, or activate a personal alarm. Emergency whistles or alarms that fit in your pocket or attach to your keychain can be effective ways of scaring off attackers who are seeking easy prey. (Some personal alarms are so loud that they can be heard up to 300 feet away.) Such devices can also let bystanders know that you need help.

2. **Use whatever you have on hand.**

It could be anything from car keys to canned goods. Throw dirt in the attacker's eyes if possible. Swinging a cane at an assailant can also be very effective; in fact, there is an entire discipline devoted to cane self-defense for seniors.

Pepper spray causes extremely painful burning of the eyes and nose and will temporarily blind your attacker. Some pepper sprays also contain UV dyes that will mark the attacker even if he or she tries to wash it off, which is useful if police later need to confirm that the person was involved in the incident. All states allow pepper spray to be used for self-defense, but some states and cities restrict a spray's size or strength, so be sure to check the regulations in your area.

Stun guns are non-lethal tools that use a high-voltage charge to immobilize an assailant. Many are designed to look like cameras, cell phones, flashlights, or other ordinary items, and they can be easily carried in a pocket or handbag. They are legal to own in most states, but some states require permits or place other restrictions on their use. In a few states (and cities), stun guns are illegal. It's important to research the laws that apply where you live.

A firearm can also be an effective weapon, but you need to be extremely cautious about using one.

3. **Aim for the most vulnerable areas.**

Even if your attacker is bigger and stronger than you, he or she still has weak areas that you can exploit. Sensitive pressure points include the eyes, nose, neck, groin, and knees. The one you should target depends on how agile you are, how close the attacker is, and what position he or she is in relative to you. For instance, if he or she is a leg's length away from you, try kicking the side of his or her knee (or whacking it with a cane). That will throw him or her off balance and may allow you to escape. You might also choose to kick or knee the attacker in the groin.

If the assailant is very close, the best move is to jab your fingers, knuckles, or keys into his or her eyes. It doesn't take much pressure on the eyes to cause extreme pain, and it may incapacitate your attacker long enough for you to get away. If your arms are pinned down, try stomping on the assailant's foot as hard as you can. That might make him or her release at least one of your arms, and then you can go for the eyes.

Martial Arts for Seniors of All Ability Levels

Studying martial arts regularly can be an empowering way for seniors to learn how to defend themselves. It can also help boost their stamina, coordination, range of motion, and mental acuity. In addition, students learn respect and self-discipline. This type of training allows people of all ages and ability levels to realize their maximum potential.

There are hundreds of martial arts, which means it can be difficult to choose the most appropriate one. The best martial art for seniors is the one that aligns with their capabilities. So before beginning any training regimen, be sure to assess your physical abilities. You don't want to overdo things and injure yourself. It's important to begin slowly, then gradually build up your skill level. (If you have some sort of physical limitation, talk to the instructor. He or she should be able to adapt the exercises and techniques to suit your needs.)

It's often said that tai chi is the best martial art for beginners because it involves slow, gentle movements with low impact. Most tai chi for seniors classes focus on health and meditation as opposed to self-defense, but they can show you how to move your body and can act as a good bridge to other disciplines.

Here are a few types of defensive martial arts that may be good options for seniors:

1. Judo

Judo focuses on using an adversary's strength against him or her. It allows you to disable an opponent by throwing him or her to the ground, then subduing him or her through pins, holds, and locks. You need a certain amount of dexterity, since the throwing and grappling can be demanding. Some instructors can adapt their classes so that seniors avoid moves that are too strenuous or uncomfortable.

2. Aikido

Aikido is ideal for older adults as well as people with disabilities. Like judo, aikido is based on turning an attacker's strength and power against him or her. By redirecting the force of an attack, a less physically equipped adult can overcome a younger and stronger opponent. Aikido does not generally involve punches and kicks. It can also teach you how to fall properly in order to avoid getting injured.

3. Jiu-Jitsu

Another soft art based on defending oneself against a more powerful opponent, jiu-jitsu concentrates on manipulation and balance rather than counterforce. While it does incorporate some striking, most of its movements involve throws and joint locks. You will be taught how to dodge attacks and escape from holds. It's about leverage and technique as opposed to size and strength.

4. Wing Chun

This form of kung fu uses open-handed strikes and low kicks. Because it focuses on precision and posture rather than raw power, wing chun can be excellent training for older adults. It's a low-impact activity that does not involve jumping or acrobatics, so it's easier on the knees than some other forms of martial arts.

5. Krav Maga

Many people believe that Krav Maga is the best martial art for self-defense. Developed by the Israeli military, Krav Maga is really more of a street combat system than a martial art. There are no sporting applications; the whole focus is on surviving an attack. You learn to neutralize an assailant quickly using simple, natural movements (including groin kicks and eye gouges, which are not permitted in other types of martial arts). The techniques are highly efficient and can be used by people of any age, since they do not rely on strength, speed, or flexibility.

Cane Fu: A Growing Trend

Why not transform a common mobility aid into an effective tool for self-defense? A discipline known as "cane fu" teaches seniors to fight back against attackers using an ordinary walking stick. Defense experts point out that unlike weapons such as pepper spray or stun guns, a cane can be taken anywhere and is always ready for action. Often perceived as a symbol of weakness, a cane can instead be an excellent way to inflict pain and neutralize aggressors.

Some techniques include swinging the cane in circles, hooking an assailant's neck or foot, and striking the knee, nose, or throat. The video below, from Cane Masters International founder Mark Shuey, illustrates some basic methods of self-defense using a cane:

And this video, also from Mark Shuey, demonstrates cane self-defense techniques that can be used by an individual in a wheelchair:

If you're choosing a cane with an eye on self-defense, it's important to get the right kind. Any high-quality walking stick will work, but some are better designed for defending yourself from attackers. For instance, a cane with a wide crook will allow you to hook or trap an assailant. Wooden canes are heavier than metal or fiberglass ones, which means they have more impact on an attacker; however, they also require more strength to wield. You'll want to make sure you choose a cane that you can handle comfortably.

Some canes are optimized for defensive use and are sometimes known as combat canes. Legal in all states (so long as they don't conceal another weapon such as a blade or firearm), such canes cost more than simple walking sticks but offer greater potential as self-defense tools. For example, a cane with a series of notches along the length of the shaft will concentrate the force of a strike on the raised area of each notch and cause considerably more pain when you strike an attacker.

Cane-fighting classes are becoming increasingly available through senior centers, retirement communities, and police departments. Some are offered free of charge. Ask around to see what the options are in your community.

Self-Defense Classes for Seniors

Taking a formal self-defense class offers plenty of advantages. For one thing, being part of a group can help you stay motivated. It's also easier to practice your techniques on real live people. Plus, you can get help from the instructor or your fellow students if you find that you're having difficulty.

Locate classes by contacting your local senior center, YMCA, public library, or police department. Fullpower International also offers workshops on self-defense for the elderly throughout a handful of states.

In addition, check out martial arts schools in your area. Most offer self-defense classes (especially for women), and a growing number of them are gearing such classes toward the specific needs of seniors.

When considering any class, be sure to get answers to the following questions:

- What are the instructor's credentials? Does he or she have any experience with street attacks?
- Can the techniques be adapted to students with physical challenges?
- Does the program teach situational awareness as well as techniques for talking down an attacker?
- How long is the training? (Unlike martial arts programs, which are meant to be ongoing, self-defense classes should be able to cover the basics in a fairly short amount of time.)
- What is the cost? (Some organizations offer classes for free.)
- Is it possible to observe a class before deciding to participate in one?

What to Consider Before Getting a Gun

For some older adults, having a gun for self-protection can alleviate anxiety and make them feel like they are in a better position to defend themselves against an aggressor. In fact, statistics show that one-third of American adults over the age of 50 own a gun. That's a higher percentage than any other age group.

However, many self-defense experts advise against carrying a gun, as it can easily be used against you in an attack. Also, many seniors have issues like poor eyesight or weak fine motor skills that can make it difficult to operate a gun safely.

If you're thinking about getting a firearm, here are some important factors to consider:

- **Are you willing to fire it?** Pulling a gun on a would-be attacker can be enough to scare him or her off, but that isn't always the case. You have to be willing to take another person's life, if necessary, in order to keep yourself safe. Many people are unable to bring themselves to kill another human being, even when they are threatened with lethal force. But if you're not prepared to pull the trigger, a gun could do you more harm than good.
- **Do you understand your state's gun laws?** It's up to you to find out what licenses or permits are required and when you can legally use your gun for self-defense. In most cases, you are only permitted to fire your weapon if you are faced with an imminent threat of death or major bodily harm. However, regulations vary between states, so make sure you find out what applies where you live. You should also check the laws of any states you travel to.
- **Can you physically handle such a weapon?** You need to be able to load the gun, pull the trigger, and handle the recoil. If you find your gun uncomfortable to shoot, you probably won't practice with it as much as you should in order to become proficient. Semi-automatic handguns can be challenging for older adults

because of the dexterity required to pull back the slide. Revolvers have no slide, but they do have harder trigger pulls that require some finger strength. Think about your physical capabilities.

- **Are you willing to get firearms training?** This is the best way to ensure you will be able to handle and shoot a gun properly and safely.

Be Confident in Your Abilities

Self-defense for seniors can take many forms. Whether you choose to take up martial arts, learn cane fu, or take a basic self-defense class, you'll be better prepared to protect yourself from attacks and escape from aggressors.

Source: [Self-Defense for Seniors: How to Protect Yourself \(greatseniorliving.com\)](http://greatseniorliving.com)