

How to find the right Nursing Home

And ensure your loved one gets the right care



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HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT NURSING HOME And Ensure Your Loved One Receives Good Care

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Deciding to place your loved one in a nursing home can leave you feeling both distraught and relieved at the same time. You know you're providing them with a safer environment, but you may feel you are also abandoning them. These emotional extremes are normal, and no amount of reading material and research will keep them at bay.

Although this guide won't omit those self-induced stresses completely, being more knowledgeable about nursing home communities and your expectations will help make this difficult time somewhat easier. My goal is to offer you essential knowledge to assist you in investigating care community requirements, to help you discover what you are looking for in a nursing home, and to realize the importance of providing information to the care staff that will enable them to better care for your loved one.

At times like these, it's important that you pause, take a deep breath, and understand there are things you can do. Good information is available, and you can make the right choices for you and your loved one. By doing a little research, asking a lot of questions, and being organized, you can find the appropriate nursing home for your situation and be certain your loved one receives the quality care he or she deserves.

Included in this guide is a Nursing Home Evaluation Form. Be sure to make several copies of this form, as you will use it as you tour various facilities. Review the form before you enter the care homes so you are familiar with the questions and will be better able to decide whether a particular home should be considered.

Also included in this guide is a Personal Care Form that, as you will learn, will help you communicate your loved one's needs to nursing care staff. You may want to make a few extra copies of this form as well.

Utilize this guide, along with the forms and suggested research, to find a care facility that best matches your personal situation. There is nothing more important than the health and well-being of a family member or loved one. This information will help you ensure that those closest to you have a positive experience throughout their elder care journey.

Choosing the Right Care Home

Because a nursing home may be your loved one's home for a long time, it's crucial that you and/or the potential resident make decisions about what is most important when looking at a facility. Factors such as location and proximity to the closest relative(s), special care units, payment resources, activity programs, and the resident's needs and wants should be included in the evaluation of available options. The ultimate goal is for the nursing home to provide a safe, happy, and comfortable environment for your loved one.

One problem many people encounter is figuring out where to begin. First identify facilities in your area that meet your criteria, as mentioned above. This can be done with a basic Google search or a phone call to your local Area Agency on Aging or your local office of the Alzheimer's Association.

Even with a basic idea of what you're looking for, many people are unsure of how to gather further information or even what type of questions to ask. With a little forethought the best decision can be made for everyone involved.

If placement is "down the road" and you have time, call the nursing facilities and ask them to send you their information packet including an activity calendar and a menu. Pamphlets and brochures can give you an introduction to the types of services offered and the levels of care the facility can manage (assisted living, rehabilitative, Alzheimer's, skilled, etc).

Always be sure to tour the facilities you have chosen. Do not schedule your tours; just show up during regular business hours. By simply dropping in you will get a better feel for the atmosphere, the friendliness of the staff, and the amount of attention given to residents. Once you've strolled around the area, you can ask to meet with the administrative staff who can answer your questions and give you an official tour. They can show you important features of the facility you may have missed. Many care communities offer unique amenities such as whirlpool therapy spas or separate medical complex care units that are tucked away to maintain a more pleasant environment for daily living.

Once a care center becomes a place of interest, be sure to visit a second time in the evening or on the weekend just to see if there is a drastic difference in the atmosphere of the facility or the level of care being provided.

Be sure to tour at least two facilities so you are able to create a basis of comparison. While you are touring, pay attention to your instincts. Ask yourself the following questions: Did I feel welcome? How long did I have to wait to meet with someone? Did the admissions director inquire about my family member's wants and needs? Was the facility clean? Were there any strong odors? Was the staff friendly? Did they seem to generally care for the residents? Did the staff seem to get along with each other? Listen and observe. You can learn much just by watching and paying attention.

Again, the official tour provides an opportunity to gather pertinent information. Ask any questions that come to mind. You know your loved one best, and answers to small or simple

questions may be the difference in their comfort level at a particular home. There are no “dumb questions.” Here are a few examples of questions you will want to ask to make sure that the facility is providing proactive care instead of simply maintaining crisis management.

- What pay sources do you accept (private pay, Medicaid, long-term care insurance)?
- How long has the medical director been with your facility?
- How many direct care staff members do you have on each shift? Does this number exceed the minimal number that state regulations say you have to have, or do you simply meet the minimum standard?
- How do you ensure that call lights are answered promptly regardless of your staffing?
- If someone is not able to move or turn him or herself, how do you ensure that they are turned and do not develop bedsores?
- How do you make sure that someone is assisted with the activities of daily living such as dressing, toileting, and transferring?
- How were your last state survey results? (Ask to see a copy.) How did you correct any deficiencies, and what process did you put in place to make certain you do not make these mistakes again?
- Has the state prohibited this facility from accepting new residents at any time during the last two years?
- What is your policy on family care planning conferences? Will you adjust your schedule to make sure that I can attend the meeting?
- Can residents bring in their own supplies?
- Can residents use any pharmacy?
- Do you have references I can talk with?
- Can my loved one come in for a meal to see if he/she feels comfortable and likes the facility?

Included in this guide is a form you can use when touring facilities. This will help you analyze which facility you liked best and why.

Nursing Home Evaluation Form

As you visit a nursing home, use the following form to assist you in qualifying a facility as a possible candidate. Don't expect every nursing home to score well on every question. You will find that none of the facilities receive a perfect score. The presence or absence of any items does not automatically mean a facility is good or bad. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. Simply consider what is most important to your loved one and you.

Record your observations for each question by circling a number from one to five. (If a question is unimportant to you or doesn't apply to your loved one, leave the evaluation area for that question blank.) Then total all scores for an overall value rating.

Your ratings will help you compare nursing homes and choose the best one for your situation. However, don't simply rely on the numbers. Ask to speak to family members of other residents for personal references. Also, contact the local or state ombudsman (a federally required advocate for nursing home residents) for information about the nursing home. Each state is required to employ an ombudsman to assist you in finding local facilities and help you receive the best care. They also help resolve any issues or complaints. You can discover your ombudsman representative by logging on to www.ltombudsman.org and clicking on the ombudsman locator link. You should also get a copy of the facility's state inspection report from the nursing home. Agencies that license or certify nursing homes, or the ombudsman, can also provide this information.

Nursing Home Evaluation Form

Name of Nursing Home: _____

Date Visited: _____

Score: _____

Poor ===== Excellent
1 ===== 5

Facility Services and Fees

Are different levels of nursing home care available, from assisted living to rehabilitation programs to skilled care? 1 2 3 4 5

Is hospice service provided if needed? 1 2 3 4 5

Is the entrance fee refundable if the situation does not work out? 1 2 3 4 5

Is there a clear understanding of additional fees and monthly rates? 1 2 3 4 5

Does the facility accept appropriate payment for your situation (i.e., private pay, Medicaid, long term care insurance)? 1 2 3 4 5

Are there separate programs available for residents diagnosed with dementia or Alzheimer's? 1 2 3 4 5

Is there a special behavior unit for those with behavioral difficulties? 1 2 3 4 5

Do residents with Alzheimer's disease live in a separate Alzheimer's unit? 1 2 3 4 5

The Building and Surroundings

What is your first impression of the facility? 1 2 3 4 5

What is the condition of the facility's exterior: paint, gutters, walkways, etc.? 1 2 3 4 5

Are the grounds pleasant and well kept? 1 2 3 4 5

Do you like the view both from residents' rooms and the main gathering rooms? 1 2 3 4 5

Is there a secure outdoor area? 1 2 3 4 5

Is there a secure area where a resident with Alzheimer's can safely wander on walking paths?	1	2	3	4	5
Are there appropriate areas for physical and occupational therapy?	1	2	3	4	5
Are barber or beauty salon services available?	1	2	3	4	5
Is there a well-ventilated room for smokers?	1	2	3	4	5
What is your impression of general cleanliness throughout the facility?	1	2	3	4	5
Does the facility smell clean?	1	2	3	4	5
Is there enough space in resident rooms and common areas for the number of residents?	1	2	3	4	5
How noisy are hallways and common areas?	1	2	3	4	5
Are common areas like lounges and activity rooms in use?	1	2	3	4	5
Is the dining area clean and pleasant?	1	2	3	4	5
Is there room at and between tables for both residents and aides for those who need assistance with meals?	1	2	3	4	5
Does the property include nature areas, gardens, and footpaths?	1	2	3	4	5
Are residents allowed to bring pieces of furniture and other personal items to decorate their rooms?	1	2	3	4	5
Are halls and toilets wide enough for wheelchairs?	1	2	3	4	5
Are there floor hazards such as slippery surfaces or thick carpet that would make wheelchair or walker travel difficult?	1	2	3	4	5
Are bathing devices available? Are hand rails provided in the area?	1	2	3	4	5
Does the facility have a community feel?	1	2	3	4	5

The Staff, Policies and Practices

Does the administrator and staff know residents by name and speak to them in a pleasant, friendly way?	1	2	3	4	5
Do staff and residents communicate with cheerful, respectful attitudes?	1	2	3	4	5
Do staff and administration seem to work well with each other in a spirit of cooperation?	1	2	3	4	5
Does the nursing home provide personal care plans?	1	2	3	4	5
Do they contact family members concerning care plan meeting dates and times?	1	2	3	4	5
Do residents get permanent assignment of staff?	1	2	3	4	5
Do nursing assistants participate in the resident's care planning process?	1	2	3	4	5
How good is the nursing home's record for employee retention?	1	2	3	4	5
Does a state ombudsman visit the facility on a regular basis?	1	2	3	4	5
How likely is an increase in private pay rates?	1	2	3	4	5
Are there any additional charges not included in the daily or monthly rate?	1	2	3	4	5
Is the facility's license prominently displayed?	1	2	3	4	5
How many licensed RNs are on staff at all times?	1	2	3	4	5
Does the facility offer training to keep the staff current on new medical developments and techniques?	1	2	3	4	5
Are there staff dedicated to different types of dementia?	1	2	3	4	5
Is there a social worker on staff to assist in the transition process?	1	2	3	4	5
How often does the staff receive emergency situation and evacuation training?	1	2	3	4	5

Residents' Concerns

What method is used in selecting roommates?	1	2	3	4	5
What is a typical day like?	1	2	3	4	5
Is there an emphasis on allowing residents independence?	1	2	3	4	5
How does the staff help facilitate independence?	1	2	3	4	5
Can residents choose what time to go to bed and wake up?	1	2	3	4	5
Are appropriate and meaningful activities available to residents?	1	2	3	4	5
If activities are in progress, what is the level of participation?	1	2	3	4	5
How are the activities supervised?	1	2	3	4	5
Is there an organized exercise program?	1	2	3	4	5
Is there appropriate, easy-to-use exercise equipment available?	1	2	3	4	5
Does the facility have fitness instructor on staff to assist?	1	2	3	4	5
Does the home have appropriate areas for special activities, such as a computer room, library, game room, craft area, etc?	1	2	3	4	5
Are religious services available, including visitation and worship?	1	2	3	4	5
Can residents continue to participate in interests like gardening or contact with pets?	1	2	3	4	5
Is transportation provided for community outings and activities?	1	2	3	4	5
Is a van or bus with wheelchair access available?	1	2	3	4	5
Do residents on Medicaid get mental health services and/or occupational, speech, or physical therapies if needed?	1	2	3	4	5
What is your impression of the general cleanliness and grooming of residents?	1	2	3	4	5
How are decisions made about method/frequency of bathing?	1	2	3	4	5
How do residents get their clothes laundered?	1	2	3	4	5
What happens when clothing or other items are missing?	1	2	3	4	5

Are meals appetizing and served promptly at mealtime?	1	2	3	4	5
Are snacks available between meals?	1	2	3	4	5
If residents call out for help or use a call light, do they get prompt, appropriate responses?	1	2	3	4	5
Does each resident have the same nursing assistant(s) most of the time?	1	2	3	4	5
How does a resident with problems voice a complaint?	1	2	3	4	5
May residents participate in care plan meetings?	1	2	3	4	5
Are the residents happy, alert, and well-groomed?	1	2	3	4	5

Family Considerations

How convenient is the nursing home's location to family members who may want to visit?	1	2	3	4	5
Are there areas other than the resident's room where family members can visit?	1	2	3	4	5
Does the facility have safe, well-lit, convenient parking?	1	2	3	4	5
Are there hotels/motels nearby for out-of-town family members?	1	2	3	4	5
Are area restaurants suitable for taking residents out for a meal with family members?	1	2	3	4	5
How convenient will care planning conferences be for interested family members?	1	2	3	4	5
Is an effective family council in place?	1	2	3	4	5
Can family/staff meetings be scheduled to discuss and solve any problems that may arise?	1	2	3	4	5
To what degree does the nursing home manage the residents' finances?	1	2	3	4	5

Total Score: _____

Admissions

Once you have decided on the appropriate care home for your loved one's situation, you must begin the process of admissions and moving your loved one into the facility. You will be dealing with a new set of rules and regulations from either the facility or Medicare and/or Medicaid, as well as the emotions of this new situation. Force yourself to stay organized by keeping all medical and admissions forms in a folder for easy access. The last thing you need is to spend an hour searching for medical or admissions documents that you know you already have! By being organized, you will be able to focus on your loved ones emotional mindset.

Paperwork

As mentioned before, complete the necessary paperwork before admission day. Fill out the forms to the best of your ability and make notes of any questions you or your loved one might have. Check on all Medicare and Medicaid requirements.

Finances are quite often one of the most misunderstood parts of the process. Be certain to discuss all costs, including additional fees (medications, phone bills, etc), monthly rates, and acceptable payment forms (personal check, Medicaid, etc) with the admissions staff. Know the requirements of Medicare and Medicaid as they apply to your loved one's situation. The admissions staff members are NOT Medicaid and Medicare specialists. ***Be absolutely certain that any information you receive concerning government benefits comes from a specialist. By doing so, you eliminate the possibility of either disqualifying your loved one for the benefit or creating a penalty period.***

Making the Transition Go Smoothly

After you and your loved one have decided on a particular facility, you can take a few extra steps to help make the process less traumatic on the resident. Even the smallest details can help your loved one become more comfortable with the transition. If he/she is more serene in the afternoon versus the morning, schedule the admission appointment accordingly. Also, you should complete the admission paperwork before your loved one actually moves into the facility. This simple detail will allow you to spend the first few hours in their new room with them to get settled in instead of waiting at the admissions desk.

Take the time and patience to realize that the staff of the facility is meeting your loved one for the first time. They do not know his or her likes or dislikes or those little nuances that make providing care go smoother. The best way you can help your loved one is to give the staff, *in writing*, as much information as possible about him or her—likes and dislikes, typical daily schedule, pet peeves, and so on. (A form is provided for this purpose later in this guide.) For example, a particular resident loved the smell of fresh flowers—she always had them in her home. Her children set aside a “flower fund” to be sure Mom had fresh flowers in her room. This little gesture made her days at the care facility a little more pleasant. She was grateful to the staff as they brought the vases so she would be able to smell the fresh cut flowers each week.

It is also important that you get to know the people who are caring for your loved one. Stay involved. Let everyone know how much you care and how committed you are to your loved one's care. Also understand you will not help your loved one by becoming anxious or emotional. If they feel you are uncomfortable with the situation, they will become anxious themselves. Assure them that although this is not an ideal situation, you will be there to assist them in making it as pleasurable as possible. We all understand that as we age, our lives will alter in dramatic ways; however, understanding and coping are two different actions. Just knowing that someone is going to share the journey will help them feel better about this new path.

Try to assist with the moving process. Be sure your loved one brings some favorite items from home, but try to help them limit the quantity; discuss with the staff what is appropriate to bring. A small piece of furniture, a television, pictures, books, or a familiar lamp may help with feelings of loneliness and displacement. However, realize that space is limited, especially in a semi-private room. If some of the items have monetary value, make arrangements with the staff for safe storage and use.

Some practical things you want to be sure to do regarding laundry... Mark *every* piece of clothing with a permanent laundry marker. When a facility is washing the clothes for perhaps 100+ people, it is common for things to occasionally end up in the wrong room; however you can help ensure getting the item back if it is properly marked. If you are going to do your loved one's laundry, post a sign on the closet door to notify staff and provide a laundry bag where dirty clothes can be placed. Being respectful of the staff's duties and helping to make their job easier will endear them to you and your loved one.

Ensuring Quality Care

If you have been providing some or all of your loved one's care, you'll notice a change in your role. Rather than functioning as a *caregiver*, you'll instead become a *care advocate*. You will still be caring for your loved one, but in a new way.

Your key roles are to participate in planning for your loved one's care and be in frequent communication with the nursing home staff. If you don't let the staff know your loved one's needs, they may unknowingly worsen a situation. This does not mean to keep pointing out mistakes or negatively make the staff aware of how *you* would handle the situation; it means you need to inform them of your loved one's needs and preferences so when at all possible certain stressful situations can be avoided. This also does not mean that once you do so, nothing negative will occur. But good communication can decrease the possibility of an unhappy resident.

You should also be certain to acknowledge staff members when they've done something that affects your loved one in a positive way. Perhaps someone remembered that Mom likes to visit the atrium after breakfast to begin her day. Maybe a floor nurse realized how much Dad enjoys the facility's pet dog and brought the animal for an extra long visit. ***The key to a healthy relationship with nursing and care staff is to communicate your thoughts, but be sure these thoughts include such things as "Thank you" and "I appreciate that you made such a kind gesture."***

Become a Part of the Care Process

The care planning process performed by the staff begins with a baseline assessment. This assessment occurs soon after a resident moves into a nursing home, certainly within the first two weeks. A team from the nursing home which may include a doctor, nurse, social worker, and/or dietitian and physical, occupational or recreational therapists uses information from both the resident and the family about the resident's medical and emotional needs.

This original assessment then becomes the basis against which the caregivers can measure the resident's progress.

The care team asks family members about the resident's medical, psychological, spiritual, and social needs. You can also contribute information about your loved one's preferences and usual routine. For example, you might tell the staff, "Dad likes to listen to the radio as he falls asleep. He's been doing this since I was a child." Some facilities require each department head (activities, dietary, etc.) visit the new resident within the first 48 hours to log this information for the initial care plan meeting.

During the assessment process, you can help by making your own list of your loved one's needs and giving the list to a member of the assessment team. For example, you may have noticed signs of depression along with symptoms of Alzheimer's. The assessment team may not notice these signs, so your input will be invaluable. You can use the following Personal Care Request Form to communicate your input to the nursing home staff. Keep a copy to take to the initial care planning meeting.

Spiritual needs:

Social needs:

Preferences and usual routines:

The Care Plan

The assessment team uses the information they gather from doctors, nurses, care staff, and family members to develop an individualized formal *care plan*. The care plan defines the specific care a resident needs and outlines strategies the staff will use to provide it. During the first month of a new resident's placement the assessment team meets at a *care planning meeting*. Family members, as well as the resident, may attend. If you cannot attend this meeting, I highly recommend you ask to be conference in via telephone to be sure you have input and understanding of the care plan.

When you go to the care planning meeting, bring along a copy of the list of needs you gave the assessment team earlier. (You can use the Personal Care Request Form included in this guide.) Together, you can discuss your loved one's needs and the care plan the team has developed. If some need has been overlooked, you can ask that the assessment team addresses it during this meeting.

Federal law requires that nursing home care result in *improvement*, if improvement is possible. In cases where improvement is not possible, the level of care must at least *maintain abilities* or *slow the loss of function*. For example, if your mother has little problem with language when she moves into the nursing home, the care plan should include activities that encourage her use of language unless or until the disease's progression changes this ability. If your dad has been admitted to the facility because of a stroke, his care plan should include physical rehabilitation exercises and goals.

The care plan becomes part of the nursing home contract. It should detail the resident's medical, emotional, and social needs and spell out what will be done to improve (when possible) or maintain the resident's health.

According to federal law, nursing homes must review a resident's care plan every three months and/or whenever the resident's condition changes. Perhaps Dad's stroke recovery has progressed more quickly. His change in physical strength or language skills will affect the care plan. Or perhaps your loved one may leave the facility upon admittance to a hospital for pneumonia. In this case, because the body is weakened and new meds must be administered, the care plan should be adjusted upon return to the care home. Another example: if your father had bladder control when he entered the nursing home, but has become incontinent, this significant change in his status means the nursing home staff must develop a new care plan that addresses his new need.

Nursing homes must also perform an annual reassessment of the resident's care plan. At these times, additional care planning meetings are held to update the resident's care plan.

As a care advocate, you'll want to monitor your loved one's care to be sure the nursing home is providing the care outlined in the care plan. Again, you should attend all care planning meetings if possible. This is the best way to ensure that your loved one gets the best available care.

Making the Emotional Transition Easier

Ensuring good care for your loved one includes not only looking out for their medical care, but also for their emotional well-being. Moving can make anyone feel overwhelmed and stressed. Add to that the reason for moving into a care home—the medical aspect—and anyone can understand why this transition is quite an emotional rollercoaster. However, these feelings are generally temporary and will disappear once a routine is established. In talking with other residents, your loved one will realize many felt the same way.

The best strategy for your loved one is to stay busy by either meeting other residents and participating in appropriate activities. Venturing into the hallways and gathering areas will help facilitate a feeling of community much sooner than keeping to one's own room. Help your loved one by making some of these new ventures with them—and encourage them to do so even when you are not around.

Again, communication with the staff and family participation is key to a successful transition. Engage the staff in this process by letting them know what your loved one's favorite activities were before they moved into the facility. The facility should offer different types of activities, such as painting or scheduled Scrabble matches. If Mom was formerly involved with an activity such as caring for the horses on her farm, try to help her make that connection in a different way. Obviously you won't be able to bring in a horse, but perhaps you could give her a stuffed horse with a leather bridle that smells like the leather on her farm. Talk with the staff about creative ideas to help your loved one adjust. The care staff deals with the emotions of new residents constantly. Tap into their experience for helpful advice.

Listen to your loved one as he or she talks about what was left behind. Sometimes all they're looking for is a sympathetic ear. However, be careful not to make promises you can't keep. It's okay to acknowledge negative feelings, but try not to dwell on them.

Commitment

The fact that you are reading this material reflects your commitment to finding the best care possible for your loved one. Ensuring your loved one receives quality care is an ongoing process. Frequent visits and open communication are the ideal way to be certain they enjoy this latest change in their life. By remaining involved throughout your loved one's stay at their new home, you will not only be able to ensure their level of care is sufficient, but you will also become an important part of their elder journey.