

How to Choose a Nursing Home

A sudden decline in health or mental abilities can force families to make tough decisions about nursing home care. In times of crises, choosing a nursing home can be even more difficult and emotional. That's why it is important to plan ahead. Investigating and visiting several facilities – before the needs become pressing – is the best way to ensure a good choice for you or your loved ones.

It takes time to make this important decision. But, there are several sources of information available to aid in your search. It is wise to consider all available sources of information to determine whether a facility is right for you or your loved one.

Following is a list of places you can go for help, along with a listing of consumer guides that offer valuable information as you embark on your search.

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). CMS offers a free to Choosing a Nursing Home and other health-related topics. Visit their website at <http://www.medicare.gov/>. The CMS also offers a valuable online tool called Home Compare that can be used to compare nursing homes. Updated monthly, the tool contains 14 quality measures that can be used to assist consumers in making decisions about nursing home care. The Nursing Home Compare at CMS's Nursing Home Compare Database includes information such as:

- The number of beds at the facility and how many are occupied
- The number of staff working at the facility
- Information about the residents
- Nursing home inspection summary results
- Quality information about each Medicare or Medicaid certified nursing home

If you do not have computer access, you can call **1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227)** and a customer service representative will read the information over the telephone. You can also get a printed copy of the nursing home compare information in the mail, which typically takes about three weeks.

Not only does the web site provide detailed information about the past performance of every Medicare and Medicaid certified nursing home in the country, it also educates consumers about quality of care and quality of life measurements.

Office on Aging. Most senior services in New Jersey are administered locally by county-based Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs). The consumer may obtain the telephone number for the local AAA from the yellow pages, or on the web at www.state.nj.us/health/senior or www.aoa.gov.

Aging and Community Services. The New Jersey Division of Aging and Community Services (DACCS) administers programs and services designed to make it easier for seniors to get the help they need to both support their well-being and to enable them to live independently for as long as possible. The offices are listed in the blue pages of the phone directory or you can find them online at www.state.nj.us/health/senior.

Administration on Aging. The Administration on Aging is a federal agency that can provide a list of long-term care choices in each state, including community services. This office can also help consumers find the locations of nursing homes. The administration's website is www.aoa.gov or call (202) 619-0724.

Eldercare Locator. The Eldercare Locator is a nationwide toll-free service to help older adults and their caregivers find local services for seniors. The service links those who need assistance with state and local area agencies on aging and community-based organizations that serve older adults and their caregivers. Visit <http://www.eldercare.gov/eldercare.NET/Public/index.aspx> or call 1-800-677-1116.

Veterans Affairs programs. A veteran in need of long-term care might be able to get help through the Department of Veterans Affairs programs. Visit www.va.gov or call the VA Health Care Benefits toll-free 1-877-222-8387. A veteran can also contact a local VA medical center for assistance.

Hospital discharge planners. A hospital's discharge planner or care coordinator, as they are sometimes called, can provide a list of nursing homes and information about each one. They can also help identify homes that have vacancies.

You can use this to contact homes and identify a small number of preferred homes. The discharge planner would then follow-up with the selected homes to provide needed medical information and discharge status.

Unfortunately, the facilities with the most vacancies may not be the most desirable homes. Hospital discharge planners often work under tight restrictions and have to arrange for patient discharges at a rapid pace. Because of the way Medicare reimbursements work, the hospital stops receiving payment as soon as the doctor clears a patient to leave. So be aware that it is in the hospital's best interest to get the patient out as soon as possible in order to fill the space with a new, payment patient.

Family, friends, healthcare providers. It is also a good idea to ask people you trust, like a doctor, family, friends, neighbors or clergy, if they have had personal experience with nursing homes. They may be able to identify a nursing home where they had a good experience. Keep in mind that individual situations and needs differ, so it's best to use the information as a starting point for your own research.

Care Managers. While people with low incomes may be able to turn to a local government agency or a nonprofit service agency for help, a new option has emerged in recent years for people whose incomes are too high for publicly-funded services – private geriatric care management.

Typically, a geriatric care manager will, for a fee, assess a client's needs, arrange services and monitor care on an ongoing basis, using both paid service providers and unpaid help from family and friends. Geriatric care management can be a valuable option for older people and their families who can afford such services.

The fees can be significant, however. And, often nursing homes pay a fee to be included in the care manager's resource list, which could prompt the care managers to recommend those nursing homes more often. Again, it is wise to do your own research using a variety of sources.

It is also important to note that most states have no licensing requirements for geriatric care managers, so be careful in choosing one. It's a good idea to find out their background and experience and check references before hiring one.

Elder Care Attorneys. Similar to services offered by care managers, a person with significant income can retain the services of an attorney to assist them in finding an appropriate long-term care facility.

Generally, consumers enter into a fee agreement with an attorney whose goal is to help aging adults obtain the assistance they need to maintain safety, dignity and quality of life. The attorney or his staff should have extensive knowledge about the costs, quality and availability of services in the community. This option can be very expensive, so again it is important to know the attorney's credentials and experience before entering into an agreement.

Marketing brochures. Most nursing homes provide brochures and other marketing materials to explain its facilities and services. Brochures tend to be the least reliable source of information for making quality of care decisions.

Consumer Guides. Many agencies or organizations produce guides that can help you navigate the process of choosing a nursing home. Following is a list of guides and how to obtain them.

A Guide to Choosing a Nursing Home. Published by Medicare, this free guide has sections on gathering information, visiting nursing homes, residents' rights and quality of life criteria. It includes phone numbers for state ombudsmen, state survey agencies and insurance counseling. To order, call Medicare at 1-800-633-4227 or go to www.medicare.gov/Publications/Search/SearchCriteria.asp.

Resource Directory for Older People. The Administration on Aging and the National Institute on Aging offer lists of hundreds of organizations, along with contact information, including state agencies

on aging and state long-term care ombudsman programs. This is only available online at http://www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/Elders_Families/index.aspx.

American Associating of Homes and Services for the Aging. This non-profit offers a series of free pamphlets on nursing homes, assisted living, continuing care retirement communities, community services, housing options for older people and understanding Medicare managed care. Call 1-800-675-9253 or go to www.aahsa.org.

How to Choose a Home Care Provider. This free brochure explains who provides what kind of care, the various services offered and who pays for services. It also contains billing and payment information, patients' rights, accrediting agencies and state resources and information. Call the National Association for Home Care at (202) 547-7424.

Nursing Home Life: A Guide for Residents and Families. This free guide includes first-hand accounts from residents and family members on topics such as adjusting to nursing home life, getting what you need from a nursing home and dealing with poor care. It also has useful appendices and resource lists. AARP also publishes a pamphlet called **Independent Living**, which provides good basic information, insights and resources for planning for living independently in an environment of your choosing. Call or write The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), 601 E. St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20049, 1-800-424-3410, www.aarp.org.

Healthfinder.Gov. This is an award-winning Federal Web site for consumers, developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services together with other Federal agencies. Since 1997, healthfinder.gov has been recognized as a key resource for finding the best government and nonprofit health and human services information on the Internet. Healthfinder.gov links to carefully selected information and Web sites from over 1,500 health-related organizations. Web site: <http://www.healthfinder.gov>

Making the Final Decision. After you have gathered all your information and narrowed your list of potential homes, plan on making several visits to each facility. Several checklists are available to assist you when visiting each facility. Visit either of the following websites to find a checklist: www.state.nj.us/health/healthfacilities/guide/vlist.shtml
www.medicare.gov/publications/pubs/pdf/02174.pdf.

The more time you spend researching potential homes, the better chances of making a decision that you and your loved ones will be happy with for years to come.