



Here are a few suggestions on how to choose a nursing home

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Finding a nursing home can be a daunting task whether it is for you or your spouse, parent or friend.

As many as two-thirds of us, at some point in our lives, will need such care, whether temporarily or permanently, especially if alternatives such as home care, day care, personal care or assisted living services can no longer serve our needs.

First, determine the reason for being admitted to a nursing facility. Is it for rehabilitation services on a short-term or long-term basis? Is it for memory care because of dementia? Or, is it because you — for yourself or for a loved one — can't continue to provide or receive care at home? The type of care needed helps cull one facility from another.

If you have the time — and many of us will not because of a crisis — make sure you take advantage of that time to visit facilities near you to familiarize yourself with them. Why one near you? Well, if you intend to visit a loved one frequently, it's easier to get there if the facility is close. Similarly, if you hope to have visitors, it's easier for them to visit you if they're also close by. This becomes a simple starting point.

Visit facilities more than once and at different times of the day and evening and on the weekend. Make these visits on an unannounced basis as you will get a better sense of how the facility operates rather than by taking a guided tour.

Here's what you should be looking for: How do the residents appear? Are they clean and well-groomed? Do they appear to be actively engaged rather than stacked in the hallways? Does the facility have a "bathroom" odor about it? That could be a sign of inattentiveness to residents' basic needs.

Do resident call lights appear to be answered in a timely manner? How does the staff seem to respond to these lights — in a kindly manner or as an annoyance?

Is the facility clean and orderly? Well-lit? Not just, perhaps, the fancy lobby but also hallways, dining areas and resident rooms. How noisy is it, particularly important if someone is hearing-impaired?

Do the residents and staff seem to be friendly toward one another? Remember, this facility could be your last home and you want it to be a welcoming environment. Talk, if possible, with residents or their family members about their stay. A simple question that we have often found enlightening: “If you could change anything here, what would it be?” The answer may be quite different from the resident and a family member due to their different perspectives.

As meal times and eating become even more important as one ages in a facility, look as to how meals are presented. Are they nutritious? Are snacks available and when? What kinds of activities are available to residents to keep them engaged? Do residents have a way to exercise?

Why does any of this matter? Well, Families for Better Care Inc., a nonprofit citizen advocacy group dedicated to creating public awareness of the conditions in our nation’s nursing homes, in its 2014 “Nursing Home Report Card,” ranked Pennsylvania a “D” — on an A to F scale — and 32nd overall in quality rankings. While one might quibble as to its criteria, nonetheless, a few red flags do get raised.

Since 1998, the federal government has used a website called Nursing Home Compare at www.medicare.gov/nursinghomecompare/search.html? “to assist the public in identifying meaningful distinctions among Medicare and Medicaid certified providers.”

It’s a great research tool using a “Five Star Rating System” to assist in the screening process for a facility — hmm, sounds like a restaurant guide but for a decidedly more important reason. The site gives comparisons as to how nursing homes have performed on health and fire safety inspections, how well they care for their residents, and their levels of staffing — all critical components to a residents’ well-being and care.

Using a tool such as Nursing Home Compare and some of our suggestions should assist you in arriving at a difficult decision. Remember, investigate before you admit!

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