



## Nurture Caregiving and Aging

## HOW TO FIND A GOOD LONG TERM CARE FACILITY

We like to think we won't need one—for ourselves or our parents—but sometimes life doesn't allow that luxury. So as Gen Sandwichers, it's important to do our homework and find the best option in our locale.

The term “nursing home” is a generic for several levels of long-term care but the reality is, there are several types of facility, each providing different services for different needs. It's important that you know the difference so you can make the right decision when the time comes. Often you don't get the luxury of time when the need hits.

### TYPES OF LONG-TERM CARE FACILITIES

#### Skilled Nursing or Rehab

Skilled nursing facilities generally provide short-term rehabilitation, including physical, occupational, and speech therapy, Medicare regulations say the patient can stay long enough to regain their former level of functioning as long as the

professionals can document progress. In reality, most patients are discharged after about two weeks, despite appeals. Medicare pays for approved days.

Some states have another license category called acute rehab. This is an acute hospital that focuses on rehabilitation. These are also short stay hospitals. My husband (who has Parkinson's) has used our local rehab hospitals to regain his strength after even a short hospitalization. Again, the length of stay is usually about two weeks.

## Nursing Homes



A nursing home provides longer stays with some nursing care. Medicare doesn't pay for this level of care; Medicaid does for those who qualify. This is the answer for patients who have long term needs for medication management and complex care, and for non-ambulatory patients.

I have a friend who has lived in a nursing home for almost ten years. He is on disability and has no

personal resources. His medical needs are complex enough that he no longer qualifies for a board and care facility even though he is still ambulatory.

Nursing homes are the level of care where the most abuse occurs. They are filled with dementia patients and frankly, are quite depressing. Be sure you do your due diligence if your loved one needs this level of care.

## Board and Care Homes

These facilities are privately owned homes that care for usually six or fewer patients (depending on your state's regulations). Residents live there until they die or need a different level of care. They don't have licensed professionals. You'll need to arrange

for any professional services your loved one needs. But they provide a homier and more personal atmosphere. They can dispense medications and handle minor first aid.

We found a board and care home for my stepdad when he was miserable in a nursing home. He had his own room and a team of caregivers who gave him amazing care. And the food was excellent!

Unfortunately, that's not always the case. My friend who is now in a nursing home lived in a board and care home for many years. It was a larger facility with about 20 residents—all adult mental health. My friend was one of the most functional people there, so it was pretty challenging for him. But he got good care until his medical needs exceeded their ability to care for him.

### **Assisted Living**

Assisted living is a great option for a person who is ambulatory but can no longer live safely at home. They provide medication management, meals in a common dining room, and assistance with bathing and showers. This level is not covered by anything other than your personal long-term care insurance. Prices vary depending on location, quality, and the services provided. There is usually a base level of services; additional care is charged separately. Accommodations can be one large bedroom/sitting room all the way to two or more-bedroom apartments.



My mom lived in assisted living for just over three years when she broke her hip and Medicare wouldn't approved enough rehab for her to return home. She was confined to a walker for the rest of her life, but she was ambulatory and had people to help her with her basic needs.

## CONSIDER LOCATION FOR LONG DISTANCE CAREGIVERS

Perhaps one of the hardest questions to answer if you (or the primary care-taking offspring) don't live near your parents is whether to find a long-term care facility in their area or in yours.



Of course, it would be more convenient to have them nearby. In my case, my parents were a four-hour drive away. I got old just visiting them! For the last several years of their lives, my husband and I would spend four to six days per month managing their many needs, including a “medical marathon” for several days.

When Mom finally needed assisted living, I made the “difficult for us” decision that it was better for her to remain in the town she knew. Her doctors were there. Her friends were there. Her church was there. A move would have added to the trauma of this immense lifestyle change.

Friends continued to visit her and before she became too frail, she was able to get a ride to church. Furthermore, facilities in my urban area were far more expensive than those in her more rural area.

## HOW TO SELECT A LONG-TERM CARE FACILITY

Depending on your location and the needs of your loved one, you may have many or few options. Assuming you have options, here are some things to consider.

## Check It Out

If you have time, check out several facilities at the level of care your loved one needs. If they're in the hospital, ask for recommendations from the social worker or discharge planner. They can't actually recommend a facility, but a good conversation will give you clues if you listen carefully. You can also talk with friends, relatives, social workers, religious groups, and local support groups to find out what places they suggest. Check with healthcare providers about which nursing homes they feel provide good care.

When my husband was ready to be discharged to acute rehab, I scheduled visit to both facilities in our area. Each had pros and cons, but after spending some time in each, the decision was clear.



Even better is to begin the conversation before need. Most older people will need some sort of long-term care as they near end of life. I began the conversation with Mom several years before she needed to move. Each time I visited for a few months, we'd make an appointment to visit local assisted living facilities. They are happy to give you a tour and lunch. At lunch we were able to talk to residents and get their candid opinions. We were glad we did this because we learned that the facility we had assumed we'd use had a very loud dining room. It had a gorgeous high ceiling and noise reverberated. Plus they used a PA system to make announcements. Mom had a severe hearing loss, so it was just a din of noise to her. We agreed on a smaller, quieter facility. When she broke her hip and needed a quick admission to assisted living, we knew where to go. Fortunately, they had space for her.

## WHAT ELSE TO LOOK FOR

On your visit to the facility, here are a few things to consider.

## Ask questions

Don't be afraid to ask questions. Nothing is too intrusive. If you notice odors, ask the staff to explain how they deal with odors. Urine or other offensive smells suggest a problem. Beware that they aren't just covering odors.

Ask how long the director and heads of nursing, food, and social services departments have worked at the facility. If key members of the staff change often, that could suggest a problem. Remember that elderly people like continuity. Change becomes a catastrophe for many.

Ask how long it takes for an aide to answer a call light at various times per day. Remember that many elderly are incontinent or at least have urgency. When they call for help, they need it now.

Ask how they manage special diets and preferences. Does the dining room serve the type of food your loved one prefers? Are there menu choices or does everyone eat the same thing. How do they assure that residents are getting their nutritional needs met?



Ask about anything that is an idiosyncrasy for your loved one. Do they need to sleep with a window open? Do they want meals at a specific time or are they flexible? Can the facility accommodate their needs?

Ask to see the current license and inspection report and certification of any facility you are considering. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services requires each State to inspect any facility that gets money from the government. Each state also requires facilities to be licensed. Homes that don't pass inspection are not certified.

### **Visit the facility again.**

If possible, make a second visit without calling ahead. Go another day of the week or time of day so you will meet other staff members and see different activities. If possible, drop by at mealtime. Is the dining room attractive and clean? Does the food look and smell tempting? Are people happy or sour? Are needs being met? Ask for a copy of the contract to read at your leisure. (They may or may not give it to you).

### **Read Your Contract.**

Once you select a facility, carefully read the contract. Ask questions if you don't understand something.

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