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Choosing a Nursing Home



A comprehensive guide, prepared by Nursing Home Attorney Brian P. Murphy, Esquire, of The Law Firm of Brian P. Murphy, PC, that outlines where to start, important things to consider, and the right questions to ask when choosing a nursing home for yourself or someone you love.

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Whether you are planning ahead or must make a sudden decision for yourself or someone you love, choosing the right nursing home can seem like a daunting prospect. There may be medical needs to consider or ongoing non-medical supports and services, which make high-quality care vital. There are also the important matters of your personal requirements, preferences, and values. In choosing a nursing home, the goal is for you or your loved one to find a place to live where you feel comfortable, well cared for, and safe.

This guide aims to provide a helpful breakdown of where to start, important things to consider, and the right questions to ask to help you when choosing a nursing home for yourself or someone you love. The guide also gives information about the steps you or your loved one should take after choosing your nursing home as well as what to keep in mind after you've become a resident of one.

For your convenience, at the end of this guide a comprehensive checklist for choosing a nursing home is provided. This printable checklist is suitable for bringing with you on your visits to prospective nursing homes.

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The Five Steps to Choosing a Nursing Home

The process for choosing a nursing home essentially involves the following five steps:

- Step 1:** Identify your nursing home needs
- Step 2:** Locate prospective nursing homes near you
- Step 3:** Evaluate the quality of the nursing homes you're considering
- Step 4:** Pay scheduled—and unscheduled—visits to nursing homes
- Step 5:** Choose the nursing home that best suits your needs

Step 1: Identify Your Nursing Home Needs

Perhaps you are ill, injured, or recovering from surgery and need the short-term support of a nursing home. Perhaps you have certain ongoing medical or non-medical needs or disabilities that require long-term care in a nursing home. Choosing the right nursing home for your short-term or long-term needs can be aided by enlisting the help of the right resources.

- **How to Choose Short-Term Nursing Home Care**

Short-term nursing home care can involve medical care and such services as physical and occupational therapy to help patients recover from sickness, injury, or after surgery. If you're looking to go into a nursing home after a hospital stay, discuss options with the hospital discharge planner or your social worker as soon as possible to ensure you find a nursing home that meets your specific needs after you've been discharged from the hospital.

- **How to Choose Long-Term Nursing Home Care**

Long-term nursing home care can include medical services as well as non-medical support for people who need assistance performing such everyday tasks as dressing or bathing. Living somewhere long term means the nursing home you choose must suit not just immediate health care needs, but also a range of personal preferences that will help you or your loved one feel comfortable and happy. Discovering what your personal and medical requirements are is important. In order to formulate a list of needs, it may be helpful to speak to significant people in your life, such as the following:

- Family members
- Friends
- Your doctors
- A clergy member or spiritual advisor

It is important not to undervalue your happiness and the quality of care that you or your loved one deserves. If you are in the position of helping a loved one choose a nursing home, do your best to ascertain the person's needs and endeavor to involve him or her in the process of

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choosing a nursing home so that acclimating to a new environment will be easier upon moving into it.

Step 2: Locate Prospective Nursing Homes Near You

Once you've identified what you're looking for in a nursing home, your search can begin in earnest. There are many resources available for finding a nursing home, including the following:

- **Your State's Department of Health (DOH):** If you live in New Jersey or Pennsylvania, the DOH can inform you of what nursing homes exist in your area. Contact your local bureau of the state Department of Health for more information.
- **The Eldercare Locator:** This public service provided by the U.S. Administration on Aging helps older adults and their caregivers access supports and services. For more information, call 1-800-677-1116 or go to eldercare.acl.gov.
- **Ageing and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs):** ADRCs exist to simplify the process of locating long-term services and supports for older adults and people with disabilities. Contact your Eldercare Locator to find ADRCs in your area.
- **Nursing Home Compare:** Find and compare Medicaid- and Medicare-certified nursing homes at Medicare.gov/nursinghomecompare.
- **Your Local Senior Center:** Contact the senior center in your area for a list of nursing homes.
- **Your Doctor:** An important person with whom to discuss prospective nursing homes is your doctor, who may be able to recommend a facility where he or she provides care.
- **Your Social Worker:** If you're looking to be transferred to a nursing home from the hospital, your social worker or a member of the hospital's staff can help you choose a suitable nursing home.

Many times the best resource for finding out about a nursing home is to ask people you know and trust, such as friends, coworkers, neighbors, and family members.

Step 3: Evaluate the Quality of the Nursing Homes You're Considering

Once you've compiled a list of nursing homes in your area, it's important to research them to determine the level of their quality and how well they suit your needs. Fortunately, there are a variety of ways to access assessments of nursing homes, which can help guide your choice. Take advantage of the following resources:

- **State Departments of Health (DOH):** The Pennsylvania and New Jersey Departments of Health make annual surveys of all the nursing homes in their states and make public their findings; moreover, information related to complaints of nursing home neglect and abuse is also released by the Pennsylvania and New Jersey DOHs.

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- **Nursing Home Compare:** Using the information available on [Medicare.gov/nursinghomecompare](https://www.medicare.gov/nursinghomecompare) enables you to evaluate and compare nursing homes. It is possible to analyze survey findings for any Medicare- and Medicaid-certified nursing home. A certified nursing home is one that has passed an inspection conducted by a state government agency.
- **Your Long-Term Care Ombudsman:** As an advocate for nursing home residents, a Long-Term Care Ombudsman can answer any questions you have about complaints against a certain nursing home and if or how issues were resolved. Your Long-Term Care Ombudsman can be found by visiting [ltombudsman.org](https://www.ltombudsman.org).

Step 4: Pay Scheduled—and Unscheduled—Visits to Nursing Homes

The importance of visiting prospective nursing homes cannot be overstated. However, much information you've gathered from research, nothing compares with actually visiting a nursing home to help you decide whether or not it is a good fit. Being inside a facility allows you to experience the home's setting and to witness the kind of care residents receive from staff. With their permission, you may be able to speak with residents and their family members about their experience with the nursing home. Do keep residents' privacy in mind—don't enter any private rooms without permission or intrude on care sessions.

One of the most significant things you can do while visiting a nursing home is conduct a firsthand assessment of how the facility does or does not align with your needs and preferences. Don't be afraid to ask questions of nursing home staff. Using the checklist provided at the end of this guide will help you keep track of how well a prospective nursing home does or does not meet certain criteria. Some items for consideration may include the following:

- **Staffing:** You will want to know how well a nursing home is staffed in order to provide quality care. Some common questions involve these issues:
 - The nurse-to-patient ratio
 - The ratio of certified nursing assistants (CNAs) to residents per shift
 - Whether or not staff members maintain consistent schedules or fluctuate as to when they or other employees will care for you
 - Staff turnover
- **Medical Care:** Nursing homes are required to provide either the medical services and preventive care you need or to ensure access to visit specialists. Nursing homes also must provide immunizations for protection against diseases like COVID-19 and influenza [or "the flu"] to residents who need and want them. Matters regarding nursing home medical care may include the following:
 - Which doctors care for residents at the home, and if you prefer your own doctors, whether or not arrangements to go see them can be made

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- What onsite specialists (dentists, eye doctors, ear doctors, podiatrists, etc.) are available and how the nursing home helps residents to see them regularly
- What types of therapy are available at the nursing home
- What mental health care the nursing home offers and how the facility ensures residents get the mental health care they require
- What dementia care the home offers and what policies are in place regarding antipsychotic medications
- **Meals and Dietary Needs:** You should be able to view a current menu and ask questions about nursing home food. Some meal-related topics include these:
 - The kind and variety of meals offered by the nursing home
 - What steps the home will take to see your nutritional requirements are met
- **Social, Recreational, or Religious Activities:** The nursing home should ensure you have access to social and cultural activities that are meaningful to you. You can inquire about the following matters:
 - What recreational, religious, or cultural activities the nursing home offers
 - Whether or not the home offers transportation to community events and activities
 - How visitation is conducted within the nursing home

Attend a Resident or Family Group Meeting

Dropping in on a resident or family group meeting while visiting a prospective nursing home can give you another resource for gaining valuable insight into the nursing home. These resident- or family-organized groups exist for the purpose of addressing issues and boosting quality of care and the quality of life for those residents in the home. Some information to listen for and/or questions to ask during a meeting include the following:

- How membership in the group works
- Who is in charge of setting meeting agendas
- How decisions are reached
- To whom the group reports
- Whether any quality of life improvements were recently made within the facility
- Whether any improvements are planned for the home
- How receptive the nursing home is to suggestions for improvement

Keep Track of Your Nursing Home Research

As there will likely be differences among the various nursing homes you visit, be sure to keep notes regarding how well a facility does or does not meet items on your criteria. Should you have more questions after visiting a nursing home, you should feel free to contact the home and speak with staff to have your questions answered.

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If you find you like a certain nursing home you have visited, visiting it more than once is recommended. If your initial visit was scheduled, it is a good idea to pay another visit unannounced. Vary the time of day and day of the week for your next visit to see how differently things may operate.

Step 5: Choose the Nursing Home That Best Suits Your Needs

Once you have done your research and visited some prospective nursing homes, you can use the information you have collected to narrow down your decision. You may find that a few homes are top candidates. Be sure to review the research you've compiled to compare how these homes rate in quality of care. Think about the impressions these homes made on you when you visited—whether or not the facilities were clean and the residents appeared well cared for—and how each home rates in matching your needs and preferences. Having taken the five aforementioned steps will help ensure that you select an appropriate nursing home for you or your loved one.

After Choosing a Nursing Home

You've succeeded in choosing a nursing home. What's next?

Transitioning from a candidate to a resident of a nursing home requires some preparation. In order to be admitted and to initiate the care you require, you will need to provide certain information to the nursing home's office and medical staff.

Paying for Your Nursing Home: Insurance Information

- **If your care is covered by Medicare or Medicaid:** You will pay coinsurance in lieu of an initial deposit. Keep in mind that nursing homes are required to provide information about applying for and using Medicare and Medicaid benefits, and this information must be given in a language and format you are able to understand. Be aware that some items or services at your nursing home are not covered by Medicare or Medicaid. You are not required to accept these non-covered services if you do not need them. If you have paid for certain benefits that should have been covered by Medicare or Medicaid, the nursing home is required to provide information on how you can get your money refunded.
- **If Medicare or Medicaid will not be covering your nursing home care:** An initial deposit may be required of you prior to move-in day. Note that your nursing home may charge non-Medicare or Medicaid rates if you do not have Medicare or Medicaid coverage.
- **Other health insurance:** Any health or long-term care insurance you have that will pay toward your nursing home and/or medical bills should be revealed to your nursing

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home's office staff. Be ready to provide the name of your insurance company and your policy number.

Note: Personal Use Accounts

Your nursing home will give you the opportunity to open and deposit money into an account for taking care of personal expenses associated with the home. The nursing home will manage this account for you and can apprise you of what expenses these set-aside funds will and will not cover. You are not required to open such an account with the home.

Creating Your Nursing Home Care Plan

Based on your needs, a nursing home care plan will be created for you. You have the right to participate in the planning of your care. If you are unable to participate in the planning, you can give permission for members of your family or another person to act on your behalf in working with nursing home staff to develop your care plan. The process for creating your care plan involves the following three steps:

Step 1: Provide Your Medical Information

Step 2: Receive a Medical Assessment

Step 3: Establish Your Care Plan

Step 1: Provide Your Medical Information

You and your doctor should share your relevant health information with the medical staff of the nursing home you have chosen. This may involve such information as your medical history, your present medical status, your current health care providers, and your emergency contacts. Relevant medical documentation can include the following pertinent details:

- Current and past health problems
- Previous surgeries or medical treatments
- Recent diagnostic test results
- Current medications and related information (dosage, frequency, indication, etc.)
- Immunizations
- Food-related or medicinal allergies
- Any basic activities of daily living you have difficulty performing

Step 2: Receive a Medical Assessment

Once the nursing home has received your medical information and has a baseline of health information about you, the next step is to perform a health assessment. The very day you take

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up residence in your chosen nursing home, your health assessment begins. This initial assessment must be completed within a 14-day period and will evaluate your general well-being and your range of capabilities in order to establish the kind of medical and non-medical care you will require on a daily basis.

Note: A nursing home health assessment is not a one-time event. Nursing home staff should review the efficacy and relevancy of this assessment every 90 days. If at any time there is a change in your health status, your assessment should be updated.

Step 3: Establish Your Care Plan

Based on your health assessment, the nursing home staff will create your nursing home care plan, which will take into consideration the medical and non-medical needs you have. Nursing home care plans often include the following:

- A list of required health care services
- Itemized personal services
- Medical equipment or supplies needed
- Required staff for services
- Frequency of services
- Dietary needs
- Personal preferences (activities, foods, etc.)
- Goals and how the health plan will help achieve them

Other Important Information: Advance Directive for Health Care

Your nursing home staff may ask for a legal health care document known as an advance directive. This directive may be a living will, which outlines certain medical actions you want to take place in the event you are unable to make medical decisions for yourself. It could also establish a durable power of attorney, who is a person you've selected to make decisions for you.

To learn more about how to prepare a health care advance directive, you can enlist the help of any of the following:

- Nursing home staff
- Your doctor
- Trusted family member
- Social worker or hospital discharge planner
- Online information at eldercare.acl.gov/Public/Resources/Advanced_Care/Index.aspx

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After You Become a Nursing Home Resident

Your Rights and Protections

State and federal laws govern the rights and protections due to residents, particularly within Medicare- and/or Medicaid-certified nursing homes. Your nursing home is required to make you aware of your rights in a language and manner that you understand. Your rights and responsibilities as a resident of that nursing home must be provided to you in writing at the time of your admission into the home and be available to you for the duration of your stay. Included among your rights and protections as a nursing home resident are the following:

- To receive the medical and non-medical care and services you require
- To be informed about and/or to have your representative notified about your care, services, and fees
- To make your own decisions and manage your own money
- To have your personal information kept private
- To exercise your rights as a U.S. citizen and be free from discrimination
- To be treated with respect
- To be free from abuse and neglect
- To be protected against involuntary transfer or discharge
- To have suitable privacy, property, and living arrangements
- To participate in activities and spend time with visitors
- To form or participate in resident groups
- To make complaints

A comprehensive list of nursing home residents' rights and protections is available on [Medicare.gov](https://www.medicare.gov).

Reporting Grievances Within Your Nursing Home

If you have a problem at your nursing home, you have a right to make it known. All nursing homes, especially Medicare- and/or Medicaid-certified nursing homes, are required to have a procedure for handling grievances.

It is possible nursing home workers are unaware of the problem, so begin by expressing your concerns to those nursing home staff members directly involved in the issue. If your problem is left unresolved, you must not feel that you should bear it. Your next step would be to speak to upper-level staff members, such as a supervisor, social worker, director of nursing, administrator, or your doctor. You can also reveal your problem to a resident or family group.

Your nursing home is required to have posted in the facility the name and contact information for a range of individuals and groups who can assist with your problem, including these resources:

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- State Survey Agency
- State Licensure Office
- State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program
- Protection and Advocacy Agency
- Medicaid Fraud Control Unit

Contact information for these resources is also available by visiting [Medicare.gov/contacts](https://www.medicare.gov/contacts).

Leaving Your Nursing Home

If you find you dislike your current nursing home, you are not required to stay in it. Provided there is another home with an available bed, you can make the switch to a home that might be more appropriate for you and make you happier. Most nursing homes have procedures in place for residents who wish to leave, and following your home's outlined steps may prevent you from incurring fees related to leaving without notice.

If you would like to investigate returning to the community, contact your nursing home's social worker for more information about potentially making such a transfer. Your nursing home is required to reach out on your behalf to any local agencies that can provide further information about returning to the community.

Other long-term care options besides nursing homes may be suitable for you. To discover your options, speak to family members, health care providers, social workers, or visit <https://acl.gov/ltc>.

The subsequent pages of this guide comprise the printable checklist suitable for bringing along on your visits to prospective nursing homes. The checklist basically involves a series of Yes or No items broken into the following categories:

- General Appearance and Comfort Level
- Resident Rooms
- Nursing Home Food and Nutrition
- Nursing Home Activities
- Nursing Home Safety
- Nursing Home Quality of Care
- Dementia Care for Nursing Home Residents
- Nursing Home Staffing
- Nursing Home Abuse and Neglect Prevention

Print a checklist for every home you visit, and keep these checklists for your reference. You can use them to make an informed decision about the right nursing home for you.

CHECKLIST FOR CHOOSING A NURSING HOME

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Name of Nursing Home: _____

Address: _____

Phone Number: _____

Date of Visit: _____

NURSING HOME CHECKLIST	YES	NO
Currently has an available bed		
Medicare/Medicaid certified		
Licensed in my state		
Administrator licensed in my state:		
Offers specialized services (e.g., dementia care)		
General Appearance and Comfort Level		
This nursing home is clean, well lit, and has a comfortable interior climate.		
There are no overpowering or disagreeable odors within the building.		
Noise levels within common areas of this nursing home (e.g., the dining room) are comfortable.		
This nursing home offers attractive, comfortable furniture.		
There are quiet areas within this nursing home where residents can host visitors.		
Residents appear clean, well groomed, and appropriately dressed.		
The rapport between staff and residents seems friendly and respectful.		
Staff members always knock before entering residents' rooms.		

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Staff members address residents by their names.		
My primary language is spoken here.		
An interpreter is available to facilitate communication for me.		
I was able to get information in writing regarding services available in the home (e.g., hair grooming).		
I was able to get information in writing regarding which services are included in monthly fees and which incur extra charges.		
Resident Rooms		
Resident rooms include a television, a phone, a computer, and internet access.		
There is at least one window per resident in residents' rooms.		
Residents are free to choose their roommates.		
Personal belongings, including furniture, are welcome in residents' rooms.		
Each room features ample storage space (e.g., closet and drawers).		
Closets and cabinets are lockable to protect residents' possessions.		
Policies and procedures are in place to further protect residents' possessions.		
Food and Nutrition		
This nursing home takes into consideration special dietary needs.		
Residents can choose from a selection of offerings at each meal.		
The menu at this nursing home features foods I like.		
This nursing home serves nutritious snacks.		

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I can receive assistance from staff in eating or drinking if necessary.		
Activities		
A range of resident activities are featured at this nursing home.		
If I am unable to leave my room, I can still participate in certain activities.		
Residents are invited to plan upcoming activities at this nursing home.		
This nursing home offers transportation to community events and activities.		
This nursing home has an active volunteer program.		
This nursing home offers the religious and cultural activities I require.		
This nursing home will work with me to meet my religious and cultural needs.		
This nursing home features outdoor areas I can use.		
Staff members are available to help residents go outdoors.		
I am free to have visitors whenever I want.		
I am free to leave the facility for periods of hours or days if I choose.		
I choose what time I bathe, go to bed, and wake up.		
I was able to get information in writing regarding resident policies I would be required to follow.		
Safety		
I have checked this nursing home's star ratings on Medicare.gov .		
This nursing home has posted its most recent state and federal health and safety survey where residents can see it.		

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This nursing home meets federal health and safety regulations.		
This nursing home's most recent inspection indicates quality of care problems or other citations.		
This nursing home has addressed any citations from its most recent state inspection.		
This home is actively seeking to improve issues such as quality of care or staffing.		
This nursing home has clearly marked exits.		
There are smoke detectors and sprinklers in this nursing home.		
This nursing home can accommodate wheelchairs through halls, doorways, in common rooms, and in resident rooms.		
Hallways in this nursing home feature handrails.		
Bathrooms in this nursing home have grab bars.		
Quality of Care		
If I become a resident here, I'm still free to see my personal doctor.		
If my doctor cannot come here, this nursing home provides transportation to him or her.		
The following specialists are available at this nursing home: - Dentist - Eye Doctor - Ear Doctor - Podiatrist - Other		
This nursing home has an arrangement with a nearby hospital.		

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Care plan meetings with me and my family can be scheduled at convenient times for us.		
This nursing home offers mental health care or transportation to mental health care [providers/facilities].		
This nursing home offers the following therapy services: - Physical Therapy - Occupational Therapy - Speech/Language Therapy - Other		
This nursing home offers dementia care.		
Dementia Care		
This nursing home has policies and procedures in place regarding the care of residents with dementia.		
This nursing home will initially respond to behavioral symptoms with non-medicinal approaches rather than resorting immediately to medication for its residents living with dementia.		
This nursing home disclosed the percentage of its residents with dementia who have been prescribed antipsychotics.		
This nursing home disclosed its current rate of antipsychotic medication use for residents diagnosed with dementia.		
This nursing home is involved in national efforts to reduce the use of antipsychotic medication in dementia care.		
Staffing		
This nursing home ensures 24-hour nursing staff.		

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A registered nurse (RN) is present in this nursing home every day of the week for at least eight hours per day.		
I was able to find information posted in this nursing home regarding the number of nurses and certified nursing assistants (CNAs) available to residents at any time during the day or night, including weekends.		
This nursing home's nurse-to-patient ratio is as follows:		
This nursing home's ratio of CNAs to residents per shift is as follows:		
At this nursing home, I can expect to regularly see and be cared for by the same staff members.		
A CNA will help plan my resident care.		
A staff member will notify my doctor when I have medical needs.		
I was able to learn about turnover related both to nursing and to administrative staff.		
This nursing home will assign someone to meet with me to discuss any social service needs I may have.		
This nursing home makes training and continuing education programs available for its staff members.		
Abuse and Neglect Prevention		
I have checked Medicare.gov to see if this nursing home has been marked with a Red Hand symbol, which indicates a citation for abuse.		
This nursing home has not been cited for abuse or neglect in the past two years.		

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This nursing home refuses to hire employees with a history of abuse, neglect, or other mistreatment as indicated in the state nurse aide registry.		
This nursing home has policies aimed at preventing nursing home abuse and neglect.		
This nursing home offers clear procedures on how to report abuse and neglect.		
This nursing home takes clear action to protect residents from abuse and neglect.		
Residents have readily accessible information about how to report concerns about the care and safety of residents at this nursing home.		
This nursing home offers information about how it responds to reports of problems and concerns.		

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