

Chapter 3

TOURING A NURSING HOME

Try to visit the nursing home before you make a decision. If you are in the hospital, ask a family member or friend to tour the home. It takes only an hour or two to inspect the facility and interview the people who work there.

How to Get Started

First, try to locate facilities near family members and friends. Frequent visitors are more important to a nursing home resident than just about anything else. Next, call several facilities and ask the admissions director these questions:

1. Is your nursing home certified for Medicare?
2. Is your nursing home certified for Medicaid?
3. Are there any openings? If not, how long is the wait?
4. What is your nursing home's daily rate?
5. What services are covered by the daily rate? What services are extra?

If you have Alzheimer's disease or another illness, you will want to know what kinds of care the nursing home provides for people with your condition. Some nursing homes specialize in caring for patients with specific disabilities. Be sure to mention any special problems you have, and ask if the home is equipped to meet your needs.

Visiting the Nursing Home

The best time for your first visit is on a weekday during late morning or midday. Call the nursing home administrator or admissions director to make an appointment before you visit and ask him or her to show you around. That way someone in authority can answer your questions. Mention that you would also like to meet the director of nursing and the director of social services. Ask to see a meal being prepared and served, and find out if you can purchase lunch. In a notebook, keep detailed notes of this and all subsequent conversations with representatives of a nursing home. Use a checklist like the one at the end of this chapter.

Walk around the facility to see how it is maintained. Do the residents appear to be comfortable and cared for? Talk with them if possible. Are they enjoying recreational activities and social events? If residents appear docile and passive, it could mean they have been sedated with tranquilizers and other drugs. If physical restraints such as cuffs, belts, and vests are much in evidence, ask who decides when such restraints should be used. They should be used sparingly and only with a doctor's written order.

Observe whether the staff is conscientious and pleasant to the residents. Residents are happier in nursing homes that have trained, dedicated, and well-supervised staff. All employees, regardless of their role, interact with the residents. Watching these relationships can tell you a great deal about the quality of a nursing home.

Imagine yourself in a wheelchair. Could you pass through the doorways? Use the drinking fountains? Reach the light switches? Open and close the doors? Get from one floor to another?

For most residents, no part of the nursing home is more important than their own room. It means a great deal to have your favorite pictures on the wall, your own bedspread, your personal belongings on the shelves, and a TV or radio. When you tour the home, be sure to ask the administrator if theft is a problem, and what is done to prevent it.

The most common complaint of nursing home residents is the food. Naturally, your health and morale are affected by what you eat. Mealtime is also an opportunity to socialize. Be sure to ask the nursing home administrator how many meals a day are served, whether snacks are available, and what assistance is provided to those who need help eating. Ask if choices are provided if you don't want the prepared menu.

It's rare that a nursing home will be totally free of unpleasant odors, as some of the residents may have bladder control problems, etc. However, the nursing home should not have a strong urine smell throughout the facility. Also, strong chemical deodorants should not be used to cover up such smells. Instead, clothes and linens should be changed promptly. Heavy urine or chemical deodorant smells are a clear sign that conscientious care may not be provided. What's more, it's unhealthy for residents to breathe these fumes all day.

As you make your tour, be sure to ask the administrator and admissions director lots of questions. Don't worry about taking up their time. After all, meeting with you is part of their job. Verify any information you were told over the phone. Ask them again about the types of care offered, whether the facility is certified by Medicaid and Medicare, and if the home has any special services or programs.

As soon as possible after your visit, write down anything you saw or heard that was not already recorded on your check list. Place those notes and your completed check list in your notebook.

Younger Residents

A small but significant number of nursing home residents are between 21 and 55 years old. Some are disabled from birth, while others are victims of strokes or accidents. Ask the nursing home if it has special programs for younger adults.

Too often, younger residents have no one their own age to talk to. Traditional programs do little to meet the emotional needs of younger adults who must struggle in an environment designed for the elderly.

If the resident is younger, try to find a facility geared to younger adults.

A Second Visit

After you've narrowed your choice to two homes, visit them again—this time unannounced! The best time for a second visit is on the weekend or in the early evening when fewer staff are on duty.

Use your final visit to walk leisurely through the home. See if your first impression still holds. Take time to talk with the residents. Last of all, consider this: Would you look forward to living there or visiting? If your answer is yes, then the nursing home could be a good choice.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR CHECKLIST

Look at the Residents:

	YES	NO
Do they seem well cared for?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are they dressed and involved in activities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are their clothes clean, shoes on, and nails clipped?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is their hair combed? Are they clean shaven?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are they up and moving? Are those in wheelchairs frequently moved from place to place?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do they do more than just sit and stare at the walls or TV?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are they talking among themselves?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are physical restraints excessively used?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The Residents' Rooms:

	YES	NO
Are they bright and cheerful?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the home definitely clean?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the temperature comfortable? Do the rooms have good ventilation, air conditioning, and individual thermostats?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is there counter space for personal items?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are residents allowed to decorate their own rooms?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are bathing and toilet areas private?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are there grab bars on toilets and bathtubs?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is fresh drinking water within easy reach of the bed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does each bed have a curtain or screen for privacy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is there adequate closet space? Can possessions be kept reasonably secure?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does each resident have a sink and mirror or an adjoining bathroom?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does each room have a private phone?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the rooms air conditioned?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the facility completely sprinkled for fire protection?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is cable television available?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

WHAT TO LOOK FOR CHECKLIST, cont.

Look at the Staff:	YES	NO
Do employees show respect to the residents?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do employees only discuss residents' medical problems privately?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do employees know residents by name?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are residents treated like adults?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are enough nurses and aides on duty?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the administrator open to your questions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are employees dressed neatly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do residents seem at ease with the staff?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the activity rooms filled with residents?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the staff members in sight?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The Residents' Safety:	YES	NO
Are emergency exit doors well marked, unobstructed, and unlocked?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are there wheelchair ramps?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are there sufficient smoke detectors and sprinklers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are lobby and hallway floors clean?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are patient areas well-lighted?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do halls have handrails?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are fire, evacuation, and disaster plans posted?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do tubs have non-slip surfaces and grab bars?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does each resident's bed have a call button within easy reach?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are there no-smoking areas? If so, are the no-smoking rules enforced?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are hallways wide enough for 2 wheelchairs to pass?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are there press-down door handles rather than doorknobs?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are there safe places to walk and sit outside?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the home free from unpleasant odors?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

WHAT TO LOOK FOR CHECKLIST, cont.

Food:	YES	NO
Are the dining room and kitchen clean?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are they reasonably odor-free and without the smell of heavy insecticides?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do residents appear to like the food?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the staff feed the residents who can't feed themselves?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will the home provide special diets such as low cholesterol or low salt?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the tables easily accessible to wheelchairs?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can residents eat in their rooms if they prefer?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can snacks be brought into the home?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Services and Programs:	YES	NO
Does the facility have arrangements with a nearby hospital to transfer residents in an emergency?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the facility have arrangements with a nearby pharmacy to deliver medications for residents?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can you continue to use your current pharmacy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is there an adequate physical therapy program?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the unit dose method of dispensing drugs used?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is a social worker on staff and what training does that person have?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the home have a resident council or family council?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is it possible to attend religious services?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is personal laundry done regularly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are special events or holiday parties held for the residents?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is transportation available for residents who want to participate in social, religious, or community activities outside the facility?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is this transportation wheelchair accessible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the facility organize activities and field trips which take into account residents' interests?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the facility have private areas for residents to meet with family, visitors, or doctors?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>