

Next Steps: How to Find a Nursing Home

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Question: Last year, my sisters and I finally decided that we had to put our widowed mother, age 80, in a nursing home. We found a place that seemed friendly and clean. Mom was there less than a month when one of the patients died under suspicious circumstances. Then we learned that the facility had been cited for numerous deficiencies by an agency in our state. We did some checking and quickly moved Mom into a new home, which seems fine. The whole thing was a dreadful experience for all of us. Is there a good way to check out nursing homes in a particular area, particularly if you live in another state?

Answer: The first line of inquiry would be to discuss the situation with the elderly person's doctor, and perhaps with a geriatric care manager in the area, as well. Both would be aware of the reputation of various nursing homes, and could probably give you guidance. Asking friends and relatives what they know about various facilities might also be helpful. But that's only the beginning.

Visit three or four of these facilities – at least twice each. For one of those visits, it's useful to show up unannounced, probably in the afternoon or evening, when staffing problems would be most noticeable. Notice how the patients are treated. Ask to have a meal. Make a judgment as to how contented the patients seem. Do the nurses and the aides seem overworked? Are there planned activities? Is there a shuttle bus to take oldsters to doctor's appointments? Are there plants in the rooms? Are pets allowed?

You might want to check into whether there are any "Eden Alternative" nursing homes in the area. Eden Alternative facilities (the first ones opened in 1991) strive to create a homey atmosphere instead of a sterile, institutional environment. Eden Alternative facilities allow a variety of animals (cats, dogs, birds, fish) to live in the home. Many plants are found inside and outside (flowers, herbs, vegetable gardens). Children of all ages are encouraged to visit as part of the daily routine. Eden Alternative homes put much of the decision-making back into the hands of the elderly residents, their families, and front-line staff. Eden officials say it's all part of a more holistic approach that seeks to eliminate the loneliness, helplessness, and boredom that often characterize nursing homes. (www.edenalt.com)

If you have access to the Internet, there is considerable information available online about how to choose a nursing home. The federal government's www.medicare.gov site presents an overview of all 16,000 Medicare/Medicaid-certified nursing homes in the United States, and makes inspection reports available on the facilities. The Web site of the senior organization AARP (www.aarp.org/life) also devotes a section to nursing homes, and includes a Nursing Home Evaluation Checklist that can be downloaded and taken with you when you visit the facilities. You could also go the Google search engine, type in "nursing homes," and be directed to dozens of other useful sites.

One of our favorite sites is www.MemberoftheFamily.net. Based in Severna Park, Maryland, this Web site is not affiliated with any other organization, and is self-funded.

MemberoftheFamily.net also provides information about all Medicare/Medicaid-certified nursing homes in the United States – by state – and includes easy-to-understand reports based on recent state and federal government surveys. It also compiles a National Watch List of homes recently cited for violations or that have had substantiated complaints made against them, so clicking on the National Watch List will at least give you a starting point as to facilities to avoid.

Uniquely, MemberoftheFamily.net maintains an Honor Roll of facilities found to be deficiency-free. Sadly, fewer than 2 percent of all nursing homes in the country qualify for inclusion. To be included on the Honor Roll, a facility must have met the minimum government standards of care; been found deficiency-free in the last three surveys in the CMS (Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services) database; and had no substantiated complaints against it. In the entire state of California, only three nursing homes made it onto the list. The site also provides a list of ombudsmen in each of the 50 states that can be contacted about problems and complaints.