Choosing a residential care facility

Choosing a residential care facility may seem like an overwhelming task, but asking the right questions and knowing what you should be looking for in a facility can make it more manageable. Because residential care is available in a variety of settings, it's important to understand the needs of the person with dementia so you can choose the best care.

Retirement housing
Retirement housing may be appropriate for individuals in the mild stage (early stage) of Alzheimer's who are still able to care for themselves independently. This type of senior housing provides limited supervision and may offer opportunities for social activities, transportation and other amenities.

Assisted living (also called board and care, adult living or supported care)
Assisted living bridges the gap between living independently and living in a nursing home. It typically offers a combination of housing, meals, supportive services and health care. Assisted living is not regulated by the federal government and its definitions vary from state to state. Not all assisted living facilities offer services specifically designed for people with dementia, so it is important to inquire.

Nursing homes (also called skilled nursing facility, long-term care facility or custodial care)
Nursing homes provide around-the-clock care and long-term medical treatment. Most nursing homes have services and staff to address issues such as nutrition, care planning, recreation, spirituality and medical care. Nursing homes have different staff-to-resident ratios and their staff members have various levels of experience and training. Nursing homes are usually licensed by the state and regulated by the federal government.

Alzheimer's Special Care Units (SCUs) (also called memory care units)
SCUs are designed to meet the specific needs of individuals with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. SCUs can take many forms and exist within various types of residential care, including assisted living facilities, and they may or may not be locked or secured units. Such units most often are cluster settings in which persons with dementia are grouped on a floor or a unit within a larger residential care facility. Some states have legislation requiring nursing homes and assisted living residences to disclose their fees and list the specialized services their SCU provides, including a trained staff, specialized activities and ability of staff to care for residents with behavioral needs. Because laws vary, it is important to ask specific questions about what type of care is provided in an SCU to ensure that the level of care is appropriate for the person.

Continuing Care Retirement Communities (CCRC)
CCRCs provide different levels of care (independent, assisted living and nursing home) based on individual needs. A resident is able to move throughout the different levels of care within the community if needs change. Payment for these types of facilities can include an initial entry fee with subsequent monthly fees, or payment may be based solely on monthly fees.

Plan to visit several care facilities. Make an appointment for your first visit, but also make one or two unannounced visits. Look around and talk with the staff, as well as residents and their

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families. Ask questions and make observations. Visit the facilities at different times of the day, including meal times. You may even want to sample the food.

When you visit a care facility, ask to see the latest survey/inspection report and, in some states, the Special Care Unit Disclosure form, all of which facilities are required to provide. The report and the disclosure form can give you a picture of the facility's services. If the facility is a nursing home, you can go to Medicare's Nursing Home Compare website to learn how it compares to the national average at **medicare.gov/NursingHomeCompare**.

Ask the care facility about room availability, cost and participation in Medicare or Medicaid. Consider placing your name on a waiting list even if you are not ready to make a decision. If the facility will be paid for out-of-pocket, ask what happens if the person with dementia runs out of money. Some facilities will accept Medicaid, others may not. If you anticipate the need for Medicaid either now or in the future, plan to visit with a lawyer that specializes in elder care prior to moving into a facility to ensure a good financial plan is in place.

Questions to ask

When choosing a care facility, there are a number of factors to consider, including the staff, the facility, the programs and the type of treatment provided. Consider asking the following:

- **Family involvement**
  - Are families encouraged to participate in care planning?
  - How are families informed of changes in resident's condition and care needs?
  - Are families encouraged to communicate with staff?
- **Staffing**
  - Is medical care provided?
  - How often are physicians and nurse practitioners on premises? Is there a registered nurse on site at all times?
  - Is personal care and assistance provided?
  - Does staff recognize persons with dementia as unique individuals, and is care personalized to meet specific needs, abilities and interests?
  - Is staff trained in dementia care? Is it required by the state? How long is the training and what topics are covered?
  - On average, how long have workers been on staff?
  - How does staff handle challenging behaviors?
  - What is the ratio of residents to staff?
- **Programs and services**
  - Are appropriate services and programming (e.g., small groups, quiet rooms) available based on specific health and behavioral care needs?
  - Do planned activities take place? (Ask to see an activity schedule; note if the activity listed at the time of your visit is occurring.)
  - Are activities available on the weekends or during evenings?
  - Are activities designed to meet specific needs, interests and abilities?
  - Is transportation available for medical appointments and shopping?
  - Are care planning sessions held regularly? Are they held at convenient times?
  - Which therapies (e.g., physical, occupational, speech, recreational) are offered?
  - Is there a dementia-specific (special care) unit?
  - Are religious services and celebrations available to residents?

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- **Residents**
  - Is personal care (e.g., bathing, grooming, toileting) done with respect and dignity?
  - Is there flexibility in personal care times based on an individual's schedule?
  - Are residents comfortable, relaxed and involved in activities?
  - Are residents well-groomed, clean and dressed appropriately?
  - What is the rate of falls?
  - Are residents with psychiatric illness as their primary diagnosis on the same unit as residents with dementia?
- **Environment**
  - Is the facility free of unpleasant odors?
  - Do indoor spaces allow freedom of movement and promote independence?
  - Are indoor and outdoor areas safe and secure? Is it monitored?
  - Is the facility easy to navigate and find your way?
  - Is there a designated family visiting area or a private place to have visitors?
  - Are resident rooms clean and spacious?
  - Are residents allowed to bring familiar items (e.g., photos, bedding, a chair)?
- **Meals**
  - Are there regular meal and snack times?
  - Is food appetizing? (Ask to see the weekly menu and come for a meal.)
  - Is there flexibility in meal times based on the individual's personal schedule?
  - Is the dining environment pleasant and comfortable?
  - Are family and friends able to join at mealtime?
  - Does staff have a plan for monitoring adequate nutrition?
  - Is staff able to accommodate special dietary needs (e.g., low sodium, diabetic)?
  - Does staff provide appropriate assistance based on person's abilities (e.g., encouragement during meals or assisted feeding if needed)?
  - Are there any environmental distractions during meal time (e.g., noisy TV)?
- **Policies and procedures**
  - Are family and friends allowed to participate in care?
  - Do the visiting hours work for the family?
  - Has the discharge policy been discussed? (Learn about any situation or condition that would lead to a discharge from the facility, such as change in behavior or financial circumstances.)
  - Is continuing care available within the facility as a resident's needs change?
  - Is there an "aging in place" policy where residents can remain in the facility, even the same room, throughout the course of the disease?
  - Does the facility provide an escort to the emergency room if a visit is required due to illness or an accident?
  - Does the facility provide end-of-life care? Is hospice care available if needed?

For more information, visit alz.org/residentialfacilities.

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