

How to Choose An Assisted Care Facility

By Cathy Johnson

Most of us would like to remain independent and live in our own home during the senior years but health problems often make that impossible. Assisted care facilities are designed to help seniors and their families make the transition from self-sufficiency to assisted care.

Assisted living centers offer more privacy and are less institutional looking than a traditional nursing home, but there are nurses and caregivers in attendance to help administer medications or help with bathing and therapy if needed. They are more expensive than other senior residences since they must retain additional medical personnel and specially trained employees to help with a variety of needs residents may have.

Before you make a commitment to any assisted living complex, it's best to check it out in person. Glossy brochures may present a rosy picture, but it's best to visit a facility more than once at different times of day to form an impression. Keep your eyes and ears open, talk to residents, and if possible, stay for lunch or dinner. Trust your instincts to get a feeling if the place is homey and inviting or sterile and too institutional.

Most seniors resist the idea of moving to an assisted living facility because they believe it means a loss of freedom and privacy. On the other hand, knowing that assistance is available in the event of a health care crisis or accident brings peace of mind to many families. Other advantages include companionship, regular meals, and the opportunity to participate in social and recreational programs, plus added safety and security.

Many assisted care facilities provide new residents with a comprehensive assessment that is written into a plan of care. Written guidelines are important to assure that all staff members are informed of the resident's condition and the level of assistance that is required. You should look for an assisted care center that allows each resident to be as independent as his condition allows, while still having access to different levels of help as needed.

Ask how the facility helps residents who need some assistance with caring for themselves such as getting to the bathroom, showering, dressing and eating.

Does the center have methods in place for keeping track of medications, troublesome new symptoms, and behavior problems that may arise?

How often do staff members check on residents' physical whereabouts and mental state of mind?

If a resident has a behavioral problem, such as refusing to eat, or becoming verbally uncommunicative, how does the center handle the issue?

Make sure that you trust the facility to manage your loved one's medical care. This includes making sure medications are given on time, prescriptions are refilled, and changes in a resident's condition are reported.

Does the facility provide assistance or transportation for getting to and from doctor's appointments?

Ask how medical emergencies are handled. Is there an ambulance service on call; and which hospital are residents taken to for emergency care? Also find out what health services are provided on-site such as physical therapy, wound care, assistance with daily injections, or blood and urine testing, etc.

It is important to choose a facility that has a nursing staff to handle dispensing medications. Some centers allow residents to keep their medications in their rooms and monitor their own dosage. This can often lead to serious mistakes when medications are forgotten or taken too often.

Ask about the training and certification of the personnel responsible for caring for residents. Are background checks performed on all staff members?

How does the facility handle aggressive residents who are unkind or abusive toward others? Is there a safety policy in place to handle residents who may wander off or forget where their room is located?

Are there programs in place for residents to socialize and exercise? Does the center offer transportation or assistance to go shopping, visit parks and museums, or go to the movies? Do any community groups send members to visit and entertain residents?

Be sure to ask how long the facility has been in business and what sort of licensing and accreditation it has received. Before you sign a contract, read all of the fine print and make sure you understand all of the policies and rates. Consider having an attorney review the contract if you find it confusing.