



Eight Steps to Choosing an Assisted Living Facility

Choosing an assisted living facility for yourself or helping a loved one do so is an important decision that can be difficult because there's no consistent standard for the quality or type of care that's provided.

Assisted living facilities are a housing option for seniors who need some help with daily living but don't need a nursing home. *Consumer Reports'* investigator Amanda Walker found that "Just because a facility calls itself 'assisted living' doesn't guarantee you'll get a certain level of assistance. The facilities are regulated by the states and the amount of oversight varies greatly. For example, they might inspect facilities annually or once every five years."

So where to begin? These eight steps will help you get started:

1. **Know what services are needed.** Assess the current need for assistance – if you're helping the senior, interview the senior, other family members and physicians. A geriatric care manager can also do a formal assessment and recommend local facilities that match the senior's situation. (Find a care manager at www.caremanager.org.)
2. **Create a list of facilities.** Use the Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116 or www.eldercare.gov to find your local area agency on aging. Ask for facilities in your area and list seven or eight of varying size.
3. **Research reputations.** Contact your state's long-term care ombudsman and local Better Business Bureau to see if anyone has recently filed a complaint against any of the facilities on your list.
4. **See for yourself.** Tour your top three or four choices. Visit formally by appointment to gather information and ask specific questions. Visit informally to see what staffing patterns are like at different times of the day. Have lunch and talk with residents and family members about their experience. It may look beautiful, but does form follow function? Are cafeteria chairs easy to pull up to the table? Are announcements for families updated and easy to find?

- more -

5. **Talk money and read the fine print.** Assisted living costs less than a nursing home but is still expensive. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, nationwide rates average \$1,800 per month. Make sure you understand what services are included in the basic fee and which cost extra. Is this facility affordable for you? You may want to have an elder law attorney review the contract.
6. **Location, location, location.** Are there places to be outside on a nice day? Is the facility near family and friends so the senior can maintain relationships? What stores or restaurants are within walking distance? What kinds of transportation are available?
7. **Who cares?** Does the staff seem to interact well with residents? Does each resident have a written care plan and does the staff use this tool regularly? What type of training does the staff receive and is it ongoing?
8. **Monitor and reassess.** If you've helped a senior settle into an assisted living facility, make regular visits to help determine if any changes need to be made. Care plans must be adapted to meet a resident's changing capabilities. A senior can certainly transfer to another facility if there's a better match -- just be sure this option is covered to the senior's satisfaction in any contract that's signed.

Resources:

- **A Place For Mom** – a free advisory service for families in search of eldercare services. www.aplaceformom.com or 1-877-MOM-DAD9 (1-877-666-3239)
- **National Center for Assisted Living (NCAL).** www.ncal.org
- **Consumer Consortium on Assisted Living.** To obtain their *Checklist Of Questions To Ask When Choosing An Assisted Living Facility* go to www.ccal.org/checklist.html or call 703-533-8121.

###

Cathy Rosebaugh is a Certified Senior Advisor and Seniors Real Estate Specialist with Alterna Home Solutions. If you have questions about this article, please contact Cathy at 919-460-1061.

