

Nursing Home Tour Checklist

What to notice, what to ask, and what to watch out for

Choosing a nursing home is hard, and you are often doing it under pressure. Bring this checklist on every tour, tick what you see, and write notes in the margins. Visit more than once if you can, including an evening or weekend, because staffing and atmosphere can look different outside weekday hours.

Tip: look up the facility on Medicare's Care Compare tool, read recent state inspection reports, and contact your local Long-Term Care Ombudsman before you visit.

1. What to notice when you walk in

- ☐ **Smell:** Is it generally clean? A strong, lingering urine smell can mean residents are not being toileted or changed promptly.
- ☐ **Staff interaction:** Do staff greet residents by name, make eye contact, and speak respectfully, even to residents who cannot respond?
- ☐ **Call lights:** Are they answered quickly? Do you hear residents calling out with no response?
- ☐ **Residents' appearance:** Are they clean, dressed, and well groomed? Are many sitting alone in hallways with nothing to do?
- ☐ **Atmosphere:** Is it calm? Constant alarms, shouting, or chaos may point to understaffing.
- ☐ **Staff mood:** Do staff seem rushed and unhappy, or engaged? High turnover often shows.

2. Staffing

- ☐ How many residents does each aide (CNA) care for on day, evening, and night shifts? Ask for numbers.
- ☐ Is a registered nurse in the building at all times? Who is in charge on nights and weekends?
- ☐ How long have the nurses and aides worked here? How much agency (temporary) staff is used?
- ☐ Will my loved one have consistent caregivers, or do assignments rotate?

3. Medical care

- ☐ Which doctor or practitioner oversees care, and how often are they in the building?
- ☐ What happens when a resident's condition changes? How quickly is the nurse and doctor involved, and when is the family told?
- ☐ How do you prevent falls? (Ask about assessments, call-light response, and regular checks.)
- ☐ How do you prevent pressure injuries (bedsores)? (Ask about repositioning and skin checks.)
- ☐ How are medications managed and regularly reviewed?
- ☐ What happens in an emergency, and which hospital is used?

4. Daily life

- ☐ Can I see this week's activity calendar? Do the activities actually happen and suit my loved one?

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- ☐ Can I see a menu? How are special diets handled, and who helps residents who need help eating or drinking?
 - ☐ Can residents choose wake and sleep times, and bathing times?
 - ☐ What are the visiting rules, including during illness outbreaks?
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5. If your loved one has dementia

- ☐ Is there a dedicated memory care unit? How is it secured, and how are staff trained?
 - ☐ How do you respond to agitation or confusion? Look for answers about finding the cause (pain, hunger, fear) first.
 - ☐ How do you handle wandering?
 - ☐ Are there regular, meaningful activities such as music, sensory activities, and gentle exercise?
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6. Communication and care plans

- ☐ Who is my main contact, and how quickly will I be told about a fall, a new symptom, or a medication change?
 - ☐ Can I attend care plan meetings? (Families have the right to take part.)
 - ☐ How are concerns and complaints handled? Can I see the process?
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7. Costs and paperwork

- ☐ What exactly is included in the daily rate, and what costs extra? (Ask about supplies, laundry, therapy, personal items.)
 - ☐ What happens if care needs change, or if payment moves from private pay to Medicaid? Is this bed Medicaid-certified?
 - ☐ Can I get everything in writing before signing? Consider having an elder law attorney review the admission agreement.
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Warning signs to take seriously

Staff avoid your questions or won't let you see certain areas • Residents appear unclean, dehydrated, or left in bed all day • Frequent mentions of staffing shortages • Repeated serious problems in recent inspection reports • A rushed or carefully staged tour • Your gut tells you something is off. **Trust it.**

Notes and comparison

Fill this in right after each visit, while it is fresh.

	Facility 1	Facility 2	Facility 3
Name and date visited			
Cleanliness and smell			
How staff treated residents			
Staffing answers			
Dementia / memory care			
Meals and hydration			
Activities			
Daily cost and what's included			
Medicaid / Medicare certified?			
Overall gut feeling (1-5)			

After the tour

Sit down within a day and write down what you saw. Compare facilities on staff attitude, cleanliness, and how comfortable you felt asking hard questions, not only on how nice the building looks. If you can, visit once more unannounced. Once your loved one moves in, visit often and at different times, get to know the aides and nurses by name, and speak up early if something concerns you.

Where to get help

- **Medicare Care Compare** (Medicare.gov): star ratings and inspection information for nursing homes.
- **Your state health department:** recent inspection reports and complaint information.
- **Long-Term Care Ombudsman:** a free advocate for residents; every state has a program.
- **Illinois SHIP (1-800-252-8966):** free Medicare counseling for Illinois residents.
- **An elder law attorney:** for questions about Medicaid, transfers, and admission agreements.

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Disclaimer: This checklist is for general educational purposes only and is not medical, legal, or financial advice. It does not create a nurse-patient relationship. Every family and facility is different. Ask your loved one's healthcare providers about their specific needs, and consult a qualified professional for legal or financial questions.