



# How to Choose a Good Nursing Home

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PHOTO BY ROB HILL

# We hate to think about a loved one or, God forbid, ourselves, living in a nursing home, but sometimes it's the best place to be.

Sure, sleeping in a swank hotel sounds like more fun—at about the same price—but when you need round-the-clock care or extensive medical services, you may not want to count on room service. Nor can you always depend on family, because, as hard as they may try, there sometimes comes a point when they just can't meet all of your needs. That's when a good nursing home is a blessing.

So how do you find a good one? Marilyn Rantz, an associate professor of nursing at MU, has the answers. Based on her own experience as a nursing home administrator and years of focus groups, interviews and surveys of other nursing home administrators, nurses, residents and family members, Rantz has written *How to Find the Best Nursing Home*, (due out early in 2001 from Fairview Press), which offers take-along questionnaires and checklists that tell what to look for as you search.

Armed with her checklists, you can score nursing homes on tangible things like the number of nurses on staff as well as on intangibles, like your gut reaction to the place. The book also provides questions to ask residents, family members and staff, along with correct answers. It doesn't help you to ask, for example, how many caregivers are on each shift if you don't know what a reasonable number would be. (There should be one nursing assistant for every five residents during the day, and one for every 15 at night, according to the National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group. As for actual nurses, the coalition recommends a nurse-to-patient ratio of 1:15 on days and 1:35 on nights.) It's all in the book.

"I've talked with people who were going from place to place looking because they knew their mom needed help, but they really didn't know what to look for," Rantz says. "They were just emotionally drained by trying to make the decision. One lady said, 'I just cried and cried and cried. I'd go from place to place just crying and crying, but after I got the question lists, I started to know what to look for, and I knew what to ask, so I stopped crying.'"

Here's Rantz's advice.

**Visit.** Walk in unannounced and look around. Chat with staff, residents and visiting family members. Look around in public areas. The furniture should be sturdy, the spaces well-lit, and the grounds attractive and accessible. Look out the window and decide if you'd like to spend long hours taking in the view.

A nursing home should feel like a home, not an institution or hospital. It should be buzzing with life and activity. If a place seems dead to you, leave.

It should smell good. "If you enter a nursing home and are overpowered with the odors of urine, feces, or people who smell like they need bathing, just turn around and walk out," Rantz says.

Watch the residents. They should be clean and as alert as possible. It should be obvious that they're comfortable with the staff. There should be enough activities—from bingo to music groups to Bible study to field trips—to brighten their days. It should be equally obvious that staff members like and respect the residents. They should treat residents like adults, not children. They also should welcome family members into the residents' lives.

Check out a meal. It should be appealing and tasty. Sometimes, meals are the

high point of a person's day, so make sure the food is good.

Look over the home's inspection report. State and federal inspections are required at least annually. Ask nursing home staff for the report, or check it out on the web at [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov) under "nursing home compare." Remember, though, inspectors only check for minimum standards, and you're looking for more than the minimum. The home's ombudsman, a government-employed consumer advocate, can tell you more about whether there have been major complaints. Find him or her on the Medicare web site, or ask staff members for the name and number.

Money matters. Daily private nursing home rates range from \$100 to \$150 a day, or a whopping \$36,500 to \$55,000 a year. Then you tack on the cost of medications, supplies and extra services, like the occasional trip to the beauty shop. Few people have long-term care insurance, so most have to liquidate their assets for their daily care. That means turning over Social Security checks, cashing in savings bonds and life insurance policies, and perhaps selling the family home to make the payments. If all the assets are eventually spent, the state government's Medicaid insurance kicks in. Qualifying for government support is a complicated process that requires you to prove that the assets were spent on medical care—and you still have to turn your Social Security check over to the home. It helps to have the social worker at the hospital or nursing home coach you through the process.

As you tour each facility, Rantz writes, ask yourself if it is a place where you or your family member will feel comfortable living. Be a good observer, and watch your reactions to what you see, hear, smell and feel. Trust your judgment.

For more information on *How to Find the Best Nursing Home*, or to obtain excerpts from the questionnaires to use in your own search, check out the web site [www.nursinghomebook.com](http://www.nursinghomebook.com). ☻