Choosing a nursing home for a loved one can be daunting and time-consuming. Experts say you should break it down, beginning with deciding whether a nursing home is the right fit, or whether this is the right time. Seniors may be better off with home-based or community-based care, housekeeping or meal services or adult day programs, for instance.

Housing for those 55 and up could provide the setting a senior may need to live independently without much extra care. Assisted living facilities with meals or à la carte health services may also provide enough care for someone needing help.

Once health conditions call for full nursing care, the length of the stay will help determine where to start your research, said Vince Mor, a professor at the Brown University School of Public Health.

“If you’re searching for rehabilitation or post-acute care for a stroke or a broken hip after a hospital, you will be looking at a different set of criteria than a long-term stay,” Mor said.

Family seeking top facilities for such post-acute care should first visit the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid’s Care Compare website to look at the volume of Medicare versus Medicaid funding for the home. Those receiving more Medicare are likely to specialize in rehab, with more therapists.

Long-term-stay decisions should be based on a wide analysis of all the quantitative data available online, mixed with qualitative in-person information.

1. Do your homework

Because nursing homes are federally regulated, they are under more scrutiny, producing reports to the federal government that feed the Care Compare site.

Experts pointed to Care Compare as the first stop for key metrics such as staffing levels and infection control.

Other independent news agencies like ProPublica provide search tools on their websites that can be helpful, said Bob Stephen, vice president of health and caregiving at AARP. His agency hosts a nursing home guide and “10 questions to ask” feature on its website.

Stephen warned that people should be cautious when searching sites and services that include a limited view of homes based on whether a facility is a member of a specific organization, and wary of those that receive a commission for landing residents.

2. Ask people you trust

Families should collect qualitative advice about their nursing home decision, said Toby Edelman, a senior policy attorney with the Center for Medicare Advocacy.

“Look around your network and who you know, think about asking your church or someone you know who had actual experience at these facilities,” Edelman said.

Experts caution that you should not be distracted by the “chandelier effect” of fancy furnishings that don’t always translate to quality care. Family can pay attention to small details: Are residents well-groomed and engaged, or do they appear comfortable? Do staff members refer to residents by name?

Smetanka said visits help answer not only questions about physical needs but also about support for residents’ emotional well-being.

“You can be asking questions like: What kinds of activities do you have here? How do you arrange for outings outside and if people want to get out in the community?” Smetanka said. “Is there an expectation that family can visit at any time? It would be a red flag for me if they restricted visitors to certain hours at this point.”

3. Visit in person and use your senses

Data rankings, homework and advice should always be accompanied by in-person visits, said Lori Smetanka, executive director of the National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care, a group that advocates for consumers of long-term care.

Full in-person tours were restricted during much of the coronavirus pandemic but are slowly returning. During a visit, family should use all of their senses.

“What are you seeing and hearing? Are residents calling out? Are you hearing appropriate music? Are staffing levels posted? And what are the staff interactions like with residents?” Smetanka said.

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