

★ OpsStar

How to Choose the Best Nursing Home

A free guide for families and friends: where to research, what the ratings really mean, what to look for on a tour, and why you should visit on evenings and weekends.

From OpsStar · opsstar.com · Compare any nursing home with its closest competitors, free.

Before you start



Choosing a nursing home is one of the hardest decisions a family makes, and it often has to be made in a hurry, right after a hospital stay. This guide helps you make a good decision quickly. It walks you through four steps:

1. **Know what you need.** Short-term rehab or long-term care, special needs, location and how it will be paid for.
2. **Research online.** Narrow your list to two or three homes using free public data.
3. **Tour in person, more than once.** Including an evening or weekend visit, when the managers have gone home.
4. **Ask hard questions and trust what you see.** Then keep watching after move-in.

Know what you need

- **Type of stay.** Short-term rehab (therapy after a hospital stay) or long-term care? Some homes are strong in one and weak in the other.
- **Medical needs.** Dementia or memory care, wound care, IV therapy, dialysis, oxygen, a ventilator, bariatric care, behavioral health. Ask whether the home actually does this every day, not just whether it "can."
- **Payment.** Medicare covers a limited short-term skilled stay after a qualifying hospital stay. Long-term care is usually paid privately, by long-term care insurance or by Medicaid. Confirm that the home accepts Medicaid, and whether a resident can stay if they switch to Medicaid later.
- **Location.** The home that family and friends can visit often is usually better than a "better" home far away. Frequent visitors are one of the best protections a resident has.

Step 2: Research online (free)

Start with public data. It is free, and it shows things a tour will not.



Resource	What it tells you

OpsStar opsstar.com	Enter a zip code or city, pick a home, and get a text that ranks it against its 4 closest competitors on 12 items: chain size, leadership and nursing turnover, nursing hours per resident, staff and family sentiment, occupancy, Google reviews, CMS stars, recent citations, harm citations and fines. It also lists the owners and links to reviews from staff and families.
Medicare Care Compare medicare.gov/care-compare	The official federal site. Star ratings, inspection reports, staffing levels (including weekend staffing), staff turnover, quality measures, penalties and ownership for every Medicare and Medicaid certified home.
Your state health department	The state agency that inspects nursing homes often posts full inspection and complaint reports, sometimes sooner than Medicare does.
Long-Term Care Ombudsman ltcombudsman.org	A free, independent advocate for residents in every state. Ombudsmen visit homes regularly and can tell you about complaint patterns, and they can help after move-in.
Eldercare Locator eldercare.acl.gov · 1-800-677-1116	A U.S. government service that connects you with your local Area Agency on Aging and other help near you.
CMS Special Focus Facility list cms.gov (search "Special Focus Facility")	Homes with a history of serious problems that CMS inspects more often. Homes on the list, or that are candidates for it, need extra caution.
Online reviews Google, Yelp, Facebook	Useful for patterns, such as many reviews about short staffing or slow call lights. Read the 1- and 2-star reviews and the owner's replies.
Staff reviews Indeed, Glassdoor, OpsStar	How staff feel about working there. Unhappy, overworked staff and constant turnover usually mean worse care.

How to read the numbers

- **Star ratings (1 to 5).** The overall star rating combines health inspections, staffing and quality measures. Look at each part, not just the overall number. The inspection rating is the hardest to "manage."
- **Staffing.** Look at total nurse hours per resident per day, and registered nurse (RN) hours. More hands usually means better care. Compare weekend staffing with weekdays, because big drops on weekends are a warning sign.
- **Turnover.** High nursing staff turnover, and especially frequent administrator changes, often come before care problems.
- **Inspections.** Every home gets some citations. Look for patterns (the same problem year after year) and for citations at the "harm" or "immediate jeopardy" level, which means a resident was

actually hurt or at serious risk.

- **Fines and payment denials.** Large or repeated penalties point to serious or ongoing problems.
- **Ownership.** Check who owns and operates the home. A chain's record at its other homes is a good preview of this one.

> **Quick tip**
>
> Use OpsStar to see how a home ranks against the homes closest to it. A home that ranks last among its neighbors deserves hard questions, even if its overall star rating looks fine.

Step 3: The tour

Call ahead for your first tour so you can meet the admissions director and ask questions. Then plan at least one more visit that is not scheduled. Use all your senses, and talk to people.



First impressions

- ☐ The home smells clean. A brief odor happens, but a strong, constant smell of urine is a red flag.
- ☐ Residents are clean, groomed, dressed for the day and wearing their own glasses, hearing aids and dentures.
- ☐ Staff greet you and residents by name, knock before entering rooms and speak kindly.
- ☐ Call lights are answered quickly. Count the minutes on one or two that you see.
- ☐ Residents are up and engaged, not lined up in wheelchairs in a hallway or parked in front of a TV.
- ☐ Hallways are clear, floors are dry, and handrails and grab bars are in good shape.

Care and staffing

- ☐ Ask how many residents each nurse aide (CNA) cares for on days, evenings and nights, and on weekends.
- ☐ Ask how often the home uses agency (temporary) staff.
- ☐ Ask whether residents usually have the same aides from day to day ("consistent assignment").
- ☐ Ask how long the administrator and director of nursing have been there.
- ☐ Ask how they prevent falls, pressure sores, weight loss and infections, and how and when they call families.
- ☐ Ask how they care for residents with dementia without relying on sedating drugs.

Daily life

- ☐ Visit during a meal. Is food appealing and hot? Do residents who need help eating get it, patiently?
- ☐ Look at the activity calendar, then check whether those activities are actually happening.

- ☐ Ask about choices: when to get up, when to bathe, what to eat, and visiting hours.
- ☐ Look at a resident room and bathroom. Is there privacy, storage and a working call light within reach?

Ask to see

- ☐ The most recent inspection results. Nursing homes must keep these where residents and visitors can read them. Ask how each problem was fixed.
- ☐ The admission agreement, before move-in day. Read it carefully, and do not sign anything that makes you personally guarantee payment or gives up the right to go to court unless you understand it and agree. (A home may not require an arbitration agreement as a condition of admission.)

Talk to people

Ask residents and visiting family members, away from staff, "How is it here? Do people come when you call? Would you choose it again?" Ask aides how long they have worked there and whether they like it. Their answers often tell you more than the tour does.

Step 4: Visit in the evening and on a weekend

A scheduled tour usually happens on a weekday morning, when the administrator, director of nursing, social worker and admissions staff are all in the building and the home is at its best. Evenings, nights, weekends and holidays are different. That is when staffing is usually thinnest, managers have gone home, and you see the care your loved one will actually get most of the time.



> **Why it matters**
>
> Many problems families report, such as slow call lights, missed showers, residents left in bed or in wet briefs, and cold meals, happen most often on evenings and weekends. Federal staffing data on Medicare Care Compare shows weekend staffing levels for each home. Compare them with weekdays before you visit.

How to do it

- **Go between about 5 and 8 PM on a weekday, and on a Saturday or Sunday.** Dinner, evening care and shift change are revealing times.
- **You usually do not need an appointment.** Most homes welcome visitors during visiting hours. Sign in, and say you are a family considering the home.
- **Walk the halls slowly.** Are call lights on and blinking for a long time? How many aides do you see on a unit? Is a nurse present?
- **Watch dinner.** Are residents who need help eating being helped? Are trays left untouched?

- **Notice residents.** Are they still dressed and up, or already put to bed at 6 PM? Are they clean and comfortable?
- **Ask the nurse in charge** how many aides are working tonight and how many residents each one has. Compare with what you were told on the tour.
- **Listen.** Calls for help that go unanswered, staff who sound rushed or harsh, or alarms that keep ringing are warning signs.

Good signs on an evening or weekend	Warning signs
Calm halls, call lights answered within a few minutes	Many call lights on for a long time
Aides know residents by name and take their time	Few staff on the floor, or mostly agency staff who don't know residents
A nurse or supervisor you can find and talk to	No one seems to be in charge
Residents clean, dressed and helped at dinner	Residents in bed very early, unwashed, or left in hallways
Staffing matches what admissions told you	Staffing is far below what you were told

After move-in: keep watching

- **Visit often and at different times.** Vary the day and hour. Staff notice residents who have frequent visitors.
- **Go to care plan meetings.** You have the right to take part. Bring written questions and ask for a copy of the care plan.
- **Watch for changes.** Weight loss, new bruises or skin tears, bed sores, sudden confusion or sleepiness, fear of certain staff, missing belongings or unexplained bills. Ask questions right away and write down names, dates and answers.
- **Use the chain of command.** Start with the charge nurse, then the director of nursing, then the administrator. Put serious concerns in writing.
- **Get outside help when needed.** Contact your Long-Term Care Ombudsman, or file a complaint with your state health department (the state survey agency). If someone is in immediate danger, call 911.
- **Share what you learn.** Leaving an honest rating on OpsStar helps the next family.

Your loved one's rights

Federal law gives nursing home residents the right to be treated with dignity, to be free from abuse and neglect, to be free from physical and chemical restraints used for discipline or convenience, to take part in their care planning, to make choices about daily life, to have visitors, to manage their own money, to voice complaints without retaliation, and to be informed in writing before a transfer or discharge. The ombudsman can help you use these rights.

Tools

Home comparison worksheet

Fill this in as you research and tour. Look up each home on opsstar.com and Medicare Care Compare first.

Item	Home A _____	Home B _____	Home C _____
OpsStar rank vs. neighbors (#__ of 5)			
CMS overall stars / inspection stars			
Nurse hours per resident (weekday / weekend)			
Staff turnover / administrator changes			
Harm citations and fines (last 3 years)			
Residents per aide (day / evening / night)			
Call light wait you observed			
Evening visit: what you saw			
Weekend visit: what you saw			
Meal quality and help with eating			
What residents and families said			
Accepts Medicaid? Distance for visitors			
Gut feeling (1 to 5)			

One-page checklist

- ☐ Ranked the home against neighbors on OpsStar
- ☐ Checked star ratings on Medicare Care Compare
- ☐ Read the latest inspection report
- ☐ Checked for harm citations and fines
- ☐ Compared weekday and weekend staffing
- ☐ Checked staff and administrator turnover
- ☐ Looked up the owner and its other homes
- ☐ Read Google reviews and staff reviews
- ☐ Called the local ombudsman
- ☐ Took a scheduled tour
- ☐ Visited on an evening
- ☐ Visited on a weekend
- ☐ Watched a meal
- ☐ Talked to residents and families
- ☐ Asked about aide-to-resident ratios
- ☐ Asked about agency staff use
- ☐ Confirmed Medicaid acceptance
- ☐ Read the admission agreement before signing

Word search: words for a smart search

O	M	B	U	D	S	M	A	N	S	T	A	R	S	C
P	T	M	D	I	G	N	I	T	Y	B	E	L	M	C
Y	T	R	A	D	V	O	C	A	T	E	C	O	A	R
U	A	O	E	R	A	C	I	D	E	M	V	Y	N	N
U	A	V	U	C	C	C	W	D	N	E	K	E	E	W
D	I	O	L	R	N	U	G	N	I	N	E	V	E	P
P	C	A	R	E	P	L	A	N	P	T	C	S	S	A
S	N	O	I	T	C	E	P	S	N	I	K	V	C	R
A	T	H	D	R	I	G	H	T	S	R	V	Y	R	I
V	A	A	M	K	O	P	S	S	T	A	R	E	Y	V
I	G	S	F	F	L	Y	P	R	H	L	N	Y	I	G
S	W	O	G	F	G	N	H	U	L	G	E	E	R	M
I	B	C	I	F	I	D	P	R	I	G	O	N	W	S
T	R	Y	L	V	P	N	L	C	B	I	V	B	Y	I
U	M	K	W	U	A	W	G	E	N	P	G	A	I	H

Find these words. They go across, down, diagonally and backward.

- ☐ ADVOCATE
- ☐ CAREPLAN
- ☐ DIGNITY
- ☐ EVENING
- ☐ INSPECTION
- ☐ MEDICARE
- ☐ OMBUDSMAN
- ☐ OPSSTAR
- ☐ RIGHTS
- ☐ STAFFING
- ☐ STARS
- ☐ TOUR
- ☐ VISIT
- ☐ WEEKEND

This guide is general information to help you ask good questions. It is not medical, legal or financial advice. Programs, websites and rules change, so check current details with the agencies listed. OpsStar compares facilities using public CMS data and reviews from staff and families; it is not affiliated with Medicare or any government agency. © 2026 OpsStar LLC · opsstar.com · support@opsstar.com