



## NURSING HOME VISITATION CHECKLIST

Trusting the care of a loved one to strangers is not easy. It is important that family members serve as advocates and stay involved to ensure that their loved one receives the best nursing home care possible. If your loved one is no longer able to safely live on their own, here are things to look for when visiting them at a nursing home.

1. **How does the food look and taste?** If possible, dine with your loved one. Besides boosting their spirits, it allows you to see how well they are eating, specifically:
  - Does their meal look visually appealing?
  - Are they struggling to feed themselves?
  - Ask if your loved one enjoys the taste of the food; a meal may meet dietary requirements but if it is not palatable, they will not eat much of it. If your loved one is on a special diet (low-salt or pureed foods only), there may not be much that can be done to improve the taste or appearance.
  
2. **What sounds do you hear?** Hearing residents moan or yell is not always a sign of poor treatment, sometimes it is due to dementia. Things you should listen for include:
  - Does the staff talk to the residents and visitors respectfully?
  - Are residents addressed by their names?
  - Are staff members rude to each other?
  - Do staff members spend free time gossiping with each other or do they make time to sit and interact with the residents?
  - Is the music on the radio or television programming appropriate for the residents? If you hear hip-hop or hard rock, then the facility/staff is not catering to the needs of its residents.
  
3. **What does it smell like?** A faint whiff of unpleasant smells is not necessarily something to complain about. Nursing homes frequently have “funky” odors due to unavoidable reasons:
  - Certain medications and diets make residents gassier.

- Older residents are more likely to lose control of their bladder and bowels.
  - If however, the nursing home consistently reeks of stale urine, this could be a sign that the facility is not cleaned properly. Urine can penetrate into floor wax, and if a resident is having a lot of accidents on the floor, a room can get a very intensive smell if the facility is not stripping and re-waxing the floors regularly.
4. **What does the staffing level look like?** Staffing quality has the biggest impact on the quality of care that your loved one will receive at a nursing home.
- Ask the nursing assistants and other staff if they work a lot of overtime and double shifts. If yes, that may be a sign of short staffing that can affect resident care.
  - Ask the director of nursing for the facility’s staffing ratios, or check their staffing ratio rating on the “Nursing Home Compare” tool at Medicare.gov.
5. **How do residents spend their afternoons?** It is a good sign to see residents moving around. A crowd of residents circling the nurses’ station or watching people come and go through the front door is nothing to be alarmed by. Your observations should include:
- Are the majority of residents tucked in their rooms with the television on and no one with them?
  - Does the nursing home have a daily calendar of activities for residents?
  - If your loved one is room-bound, does the staff bring activities to their room?
6. **Do you see bruising or unexplained bedsores?** Do not assume that any black-and-blue mark you see on your loved one is a sign of abuse. As people age, their skin becomes more fragile and certain medications make the skin more sensitive. Sadly, as a resident becomes more sick and frail, bedsores may be unavoidable. But some marks or bedsores shouldn’t be ignored:
- Does your loved one have finger-shaped bruises around the upper arm?
  - Are there handprint-shaped marks on the face, stomach, or back? These areas are unlikely to be bruised by a fall.
  - If your loved one is confined to a bed, how often are they being shifted or rotated?
7. **Are personal care needs being met?** Poor nursing home hygiene can create situations that spread disease and result in residents getting infections. Most nursing home residents will need assistance with activities like going to the bathroom, changing their diapers, bathing, brushing their teeth, changing their clothes, and related activities. Some special considerations include:



- If your loved one is incontinent, ask how many times a day their adult diapers are changed.
- Is their personal appearance well-kept?
- Is their clothing clean?
- Is their room and bathroom clean?

**Solving the Problems You Find:**

If you have issues with your loved one's care, your first conversation should be with the unit manager or floor manager for your loved one's floor. If this conversation doesn't fix the issue, continue up the chain of command. File a grievance form or complaint for issues that are persistent and reoccur often. Consult with the nursing home ombudsman, an advocate for nursing home residents whose contact information should be posted in the facility. If the issue continues and isn't addressed within 48 hours, talk to the nursing home administrator. And if you are still unsatisfied, file a complaint with the state agency that regulates nursing homes, in Massachusetts, the Department of Public Health, at 1-800-462-5540.