Considering when to move your loved one to a long-term care facility (nursing home)

When is the right time to consider a long-term care home?

One of the most challenging things for a caregiver is to determine when you can no longer provide the needed care at home. As a caregiver, you should not consider a move to a long-term home as a failure. In fact, 57% of seniors living in long-term care homes have a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or other dementia, and for many, this will be their final home; 70% of all people with dementia die in nursing homes.

Making this decision can cause a wide range of emotions, including guilt, loss, sadness, anger, shame, resentment and a sense of failure.

Caregivers may find it hard to pick the right time to consider moving the person with Alzheimer's disease to a long-term care home. As the person with Alzheimer's disease progresses in the middle stage of the disease, he or she will need 24-hour supervision to keep them safe. In the late stage of the disease, the care becomes much more intensive and becomes very difficult for most caregivers to provide.

The table below reviews some questions to ask yourself when considering moving a person with Alzheimer's disease into a long-term care home.

Questions for caregivers to answer to determine if it is the right time to move your loved one to a long-term care home
– Is the person with dementia becoming unsafe in their current home? – Is the health of the person with dementia or my health as a caregiver at risk? – Has the person with dementia worsened?   – They may have been in the hospital or their needs are becoming more complex – Are the person's care needs beyond my physical abilities? – Am I becoming a stressed, irritable and impatient caregiver? – Am I neglecting work responsibilities, my family and myself? – Would the structure and social interaction at a care facility benefit the person with dementia?

Who makes the decision to move the person to a long-term care home?

In some cases, the person with dementia will be able to decide for themselves whether or not they need to move into a home. If this is the case, then they should make their own decision—and be offered any help they need to do so. However, often by the time the person with dementia needs the level of care that a care home provides, they have lost the ability to make this decision for themselves.

By having a long-term plan in place soon after the diagnosis, you and your family can have all the legal requirements in place to start the process of moving the person with Alzheimer's disease to a long-term care home at the right time.

How do you choose a long-term care home?

It is a good idea to start familiarizing yourself with long-term care homes in the community, including services, policies and costs, so that you are ready to make a decision if a room becomes available. Caregivers are encouraged to visit and tour some of these homes with a friend or family member. This can help to see if the home is a good fit for the person you are caring for.

During these tours and visits, a helpful tip is to pay attention to your gut feeling because this can help to guide you on making the right choice for the person with Alzheimer's disease. The table below reviews some things to consider when choosing a long-term care home.

Questions to consider when reviewing a long-term care home	
Things to consider before visiting the home	Facility location – How hard is it to get to the facility? – How close is the facility to my home? – Is there enough parking or transit to get to the home? The home – Is there a unit for a person with dementia? – Can people with dementia live there through the whole course of the disease? (even when the disease gets much worse) – What are the costs to stay there? Are there additional costs when the condition gets worse? – Does the home offer tours? – Is there a waiting list for a room? – What are the rules to get on and be moved up the waiting list? – Is the home accredited and inspected regularly?
Physical setup of the home	– Is the home clean and tidy, without feeling like a hospital? – Is the facility free of unpleasant odours? – Are there quiet areas for visitors to spend time with the person with Alzheimer's disease? – Can residents walk safely indoors and outdoors? – Does the setup promote resident independence? – Are residents' rooms clean and spacious? – Are residents allowed to bring familiar items with them, as well as personal items that are important to them (such as pictures)? – Are the bathrooms safe and clean? – Are there clear signs to help residents get around the home?

Questions to consider when reviewing a long-term care home	
Resident care and staff	– Is there consistent staffing, so residents can get to know staff members? – Are staff trained to deal with people with dementia? – Are personal care and assistance provided? – Can the staff handle challenging behaviours? – Is there a doctor or nurse practitioner on call? – Does the home have access to other services (e.g., opticians, dentists, physiotherapist, foot care, hairdresser)? – Do the staff use restraints? – How are medical emergencies handled? – Are the staff able to provide palliative care?
Programs and services	– What are the planned activities at the home? – Are there specific activities for specific needs, interests and abilities? – Are there activities available on the weekends or during evenings? – Are care-planning sessions offered regularly? – What is the visitor policy for the home?
Meals	– Are there regular meal and snack times? – What is the food menu and what types of food are offered? – Are friends and family able to join at mealtimes? – Are there noisy distractions during mealtimes?

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