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Choosing Long-Term Care



Choosing a long-term care facility for yourself or a loved one is confusing and stressful. Learning about the various options and considerations ahead of time can take some of the doubt out of a frustrating experience.

Factors To Consider

There are many types of long-term care. What's appropriate for you or your loved one will depend on the answers to these questions:

- Is long-term care insurance available?
- Can the person needing care walk unassisted and feed him or herself?
- Is constant medical supervision necessary?
- Is special assistance, such as physical therapy or Alzheimer's help, needed?
- What resources - such as Medicaid, Medicare and private insurance or other funds - are available to pay for the care?

Types of Facilities

There's a big range of care available to residents of long-term care facilities. From least restrictive to most restrictive, they include:

- Independent living residences, with separate living quarters and no special living or medical assistance
- Assisted living facilities, with small private living quarters, some help with daily tasks such as eating and dressing, and monitoring of health needs when needed
- Nursing home or rest home facilities, which offer 24/7 assistance with daily living tasks and fulltime health monitoring, but no extensive medical care
- Intermediate care facilities or skilled nursing care facilities, with intensive medical care for the chronically and seriously ill
- Extended care facilities, which are usually hospital-affiliated and offer short-term care for seriously ill patients

Resources For Long-Term Care Facility Referrals

There are many people who can give you ideas on which long-term care facilities to consider, including:

- Your family physician
- Hospital discharge planners, social workers and home healthcare nurses
- Friends and neighbors who have been through similar experiences
- Your church pastor
- Geriatric screening programs through a local hospital or community center
- Government agencies, such as the federal Area Agencies on Aging, or local social services or family services groups

Touring the Facility

When you have your choices narrowed down, it's best to tour the facilities during business hours without an appointment. You can meet with the staff, see everything and take a meal if there are dining facilities. It's best to go back for a second look in the evening or on a weekend to see if there are differences in staffing at "off" hours.

Things to think about when touring a facility include:

- How long did you have to wait to see a staff member?
- Does the facility look and smell clean?
- How does the staff interact with the residents?
- Are residents interacting socially with each other?

Necessary Information

Some questions to ask while at a facility include:

- Who responds to emergency calls for help and how soon?

- What is the ratio of staff care providers to residents?
- How are immobile residents cared for?
- What is the cost of care? Are there additional charges for "extra" services?
- Is the care covered by Medicare or Medicaid? (Aside from practical financial considerations, eligibility for these programs means the facility has met minimum government standards for safety and cleanliness)
- Does the facility maintain liability and malpractice insurance?
- Are health licenses and state inspections up to date?
- Is there a physician on staff or on call? Is a licensed nurse on duty at all times?
- Are all staff members trained in first aid and CPR, with emergency equipment easily accessible?
- Are medications and other potentially dangerous items locked up, so that someone who is disoriented can't access them?
- Is there an emergency exit plan in place, with easy exit access?
- Can family members visit? Can you visit any time or just at specific times and places?

You can also investigate on your own by:

- Checking with the local courts to see if there are any pending lawsuits for malpractice or unpaid debts
- Checking with state and local agencies and boards to find out what certifications the facility has and how well it rated in recent surveys of state facilities
- Checking with local fire marshals to see if safety standards are met
- If you or your loved one has an Alzheimer's diagnosis, you'll want to ask about staff members' familiarity with the disorder, and ask specific questions about:
 - Special physical precautions, such as extra locked cabinets and supply areas
 - Alarms on exits
 - Staff familiarity with recent Alzheimer's developments and treatments
 - Increased staffing ratios for Alzheimer's patients

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Listening Tips for Difficult Situations

During your workday, you are going to encounter boring and uninteresting meetings or lectures which require attention that may be hard for you to give. We've all sat through a lengthy presentation in which it was hard to stay alert or a meeting that just seemed to go on and on without accomplishing anything. In these situations, it's key that you stay engaged. Use the tips and techniques below to help you stay focused so you can better listen and take in what's going on.

Listening During Boring Meetings

- In a boring meeting, try taking notes. By incorporating an activity into your listening, you can focus your attention.
- Mentally list or relate the points being made. How do they affect you? What do you know about them?
- Ask questions and stay engaged with the speaker.

Staying Alert During Lectures

- Sit near the front of the room and try to have a clear view of the speaker. Avoid sitting next to noisy people, and try to be as close to the speaker as possible.
- Do research about the lecturing topic beforehand. Bring notes or take notes while the speaker is talking. However, don't let taking notes distract you - write down only what's important.
- Give eye contact and attention to the speaker.

Staying Focused in an Interview

- If you are unclear about what the person has said, try repeating what he or she has just told you. This will tell you if you heard the person correctly.
- Try to have a normal conversation, rather than one person asking and the other answering.
- Give eye contact and appropriate body language.

Handling Problems Through Effective Communication

- When a person approaches you with a problem, listen to what he or she tells you, and then rephrase the problem. This way, the person can correct you if needed, and you can also help him or her visualize a solution.
- Get to know your colleagues and how you or other colleagues can best help them.
- Don't sit behind your desk when someone comes to you for advice. Sit next to or across from the person with nothing in between.
- Try not to be judgmental. Be understanding, and truly listen to what the person is saying. Don't get caught up in mental or emotional filters; try your best to be an effective listener.
- Notice the body language of yourself and adjust it if necessary. Notice the body language of the other person; it'll give you insight into what he or she is really trying to say.
- After you and the person finish talking about the problem, summarize what's been said and agree on steps to move forward.

Listening to Your Boss

- Don't let attitudes interfere with listening. Drop judgments and sharp criticisms when speaking with him or her.
- Avoid mental and emotional filters when you talk to your boss. Talk and listen with a nonjudgmental attitude.
- Be aware of body language and tone.
- Listen with empathy and understanding.

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Understanding Your Diagnosis of Type 2 Diabetes

If you're diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, it can take a while to understand all you need to do to manage this complex disease.

"It takes more than a visit or two to settle in and get the information you need," explains Carole Mensing, R.N., M.A., CDE, president of health care and education for the American Diabetes Association and a diabetes clinical nurse specialist at the University of Connecticut in Farmington. "Many first-time patients will say to me, 'Give me a pill and get me out of here.' Often, I think they don't understand the depth and complexity of their condition."

Blood sugar and your health

Soon after a diagnosis of diabetes, your health care provider is likely to tell you about the importance of healthful lifestyle changes, personal self-care and medical tests -- everything from skin and foot care to smoking cessation, weight control and regular eye exams.

Following your provider's recommendations can help you prevent or delay the serious complications of uncontrolled diabetes: blindness, kidney failure, heart attack, stroke and amputation of one or both legs below the knee.

To keep it simple, it's helpful to know one common theme runs through nearly every aspect of managing diabetes: blood sugar (blood glucose) control.

"Blood glucose levels have everything to do with your health," says Ms. Mensing. With type 2 diabetes, the body is unable to produce enough insulin or properly use the hormone insulin, which the body depends on to get glucose into the cells where it can be used as fuel.

Glucose levels in the blood increase when insulin is absent or insufficient, or not used effectively and glucose cannot be transported into cells. Subsequently, your body doesn't get the fuel it needs. What's more, when blood levels stay high over time, blood vessels become thickened and lose their elasticity. This decreases blood flow in the smallest vessels, the capillaries, and can lead to serious damage to major organs.

To help prevent or delay these complications, you must keep your blood glucose levels as normal as possible. You do this through glucose monitoring, lifestyle changes and medications, if necessary.

Your team of health care providers -- such as your primary care physician, a nurse educator and a dietitian -- can support you through all the steps needed to help control your blood sugar levels.

Glucose testing

In the first days or weeks after diagnosis, you may be asked to closely monitor your blood glucose levels. These glucose tests can show how your body responds to diet, exercise and other treatments and reveal any need for medication.

"One blood sugar test a day does not provide enough information," stresses Ms. Mensing. "A single test only gives a snapshot of your blood sugar level at a given moment. If you get a high or low reading, repeat it soon afterward so you know if your blood sugar is rising or falling."

Keep a record of each test and time of day it was done, and share this information with your physician. Timing has a bearing on how your doctor might alter your treatment.

Weight control

Controlling your weight is a leading prescription both for managing type 2 diabetes. It also helps prevent diabetes in the first place.

"If you're predisposed to diabetes, then being overweight makes the insulin your body produces much less effective," says Ms. Mensing.

Losing 7 to 10 percent of your body weight can lower your insulin resistance and help your blood glucose levels come down naturally.

Meal planning

A person with diabetes needs to pay close attention to meal planning. You must be consistent with caloric intake throughout the day, eating small portions frequently -- and consistently. A balanced diet should include protein (10 to 13 percent of your daily calories), carbohydrates (57 to 65 percent of your daily calories) and fat (25 to 30 percent of your daily calories). Carbohydrates should be mostly "complex" (starches), instead of "simple" (sugars). Fresh or frozen vegetables are an important part of your diet.

"One of the most common misconceptions patients have is that they must cut all the 'white foods' from their diets -- like potatoes, rice, bread and sugar," says Ms. Mensing.

But eating complex carbohydrates as part of a healthful diet can help the body maintain its energy, provide fiber that may actually help control blood sugar and keep you healthier overall.

Physical activity

Getting your body moving not only helps you lose weight by burning calories, but also can help your body use blood glucose. Active muscles can remove glucose from the blood without the presence of insulin. Inactive muscles require insulin to take glucose from the blood. You don't have to run a marathon or work out at the gym every day, Ms. Mensing says. Just taking a brisk walk for 60 minutes a day, most days of the week, can make a real difference to your health. You can break up your activity into several shorter segments through the day.

Oral medications

Diabetes pills don't contain insulin, which can be delivered only by shots, by an insulin pump or by inhalation. However, they can help control your blood sugar by stimulating the body's own insulin production or increasing the body's ability to utilize the insulin being produced.

Insulin

In years past, insulin was prescribed only for people whose bodies could produce little or no insulin (primarily people with type 1 diabetes). Today, however, insulin sometimes is part of the standard type 2 treatment plan to get blood sugar back to more normal levels.

"Every person is evaluated individually," says Ms. Mensing. "Medicines are chosen based on the blood glucose levels, health and abilities of each person."

If all these steps are too much to contemplate all at once, realize you don't have to do them alone.

"Education is the key to success," says Ms. Mensing. "Know that your health care team is right there, ready to help when questions arise. Use your experts -- that's what we're here for."

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