

## Home Health Care

Home health care helps seniors live independently for as long as possible, given the limits of their medical condition. It covers a wide range of services and can often delay the need for long-term nursing home care.

More specifically, home health care may include occupational and physical therapy, speech therapy, and even skilled nursing. It may involve helping the elderly with activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing, and eating. Or it may include assistance with cooking, cleaning, other housekeeping jobs, and monitoring one's daily regimen of prescription and over-the-counter medications.

At this point, it is important to understand the difference between home health care and home care services. Although they sound the same (and home health care may include some home care services), home health care is more medically oriented. While home care typically includes chore and housecleaning services, home health care usually involves helping seniors recover from an illness or injury. That is why the people who provide home health care are often licensed practical nurses, therapists, or home health aides. Most work for home health agencies, hospitals, or public health departments that are licensed by the state.

### How Do I Make Sure that Home Health Care is Quality Care?

As with any important purchase, it is always a good idea to talk with friends, neighbors, and your local area agency on aging to learn more about the



home health care agencies in your community. In looking for a home health care agency, the following questions can be used to help guide your search:

- How long has the agency been serving this community?
- Does the agency have any printed material describing the services it offers and its pricing?
- Is the agency an approved Medicare provider?
- Is the quality of care certified by a national accrediting body such as the Joint Commission for the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations?
- Does the agency have a current license to practice (if required in the state where you live)?
- Does the agency offer seniors a "Patients' Bill of Rights" that describes the rights and responsibilities of both the agency and the senior being cared for?
- Does the agency write a plan of care for the patient (with input from the patient, his or her doctor and family), and update the plan as necessary?

- How closely do supervisors oversee care to ensure quality?
- Are agency staff members available around the clock, seven days a week, if necessary?
- Does the agency have a nursing supervisor available to provide on-call assistance 24 hours a day?
- How does the agency ensure patient confidentiality?
- How are agency caregivers hired and trained?
- What is the procedure for resolving problems when they occur, and who can I call with questions or complaints?
- Is there a sliding fee schedule based on ability to pay, and is financial assistance available to pay for services?
- Will the agency provide a list of references for its caregivers?
- Who does the agency call if the home health care worker cannot come when scheduled?
- What type of employee screening is done?

When purchasing home health care directly from an individual provider (instead of through an agency), it is even more important to screen the person thoroughly. This should include an interview with the home health caregiver to make sure that he or she is qualified for the job. You should request references. Also, prepare for the interview by making a list of any special needs the senior might have. For example, you would want to note whether the elderly patient needs help getting into or out of a wheelchair. If so, the home health caregiver must be able to provide that assistance.

Whether you arrange for home health care through an agency or hire an independent home health care aide on an individual basis, it helps to spend some time preparing for the person who will be doing the

work. Ideally, you could spend a day with him or her, before the job formally begins, to discuss what will be involved in the daily routine. If nothing else, tell the home health care provider (both verbally and in writing) the following things that he or she should know about the senior:

- Illnesses/injuries, and signs of an emergency medical situation
- Likes and dislikes
- Medications, and how and when they should be taken
- Need for dentures, eyeglasses, canes, walkers, etc.
- Possible behavior problems and how best to deal with them
- Problems getting around (in or out of a wheelchair, for example, or trouble walking)
- Special diets or nutritional needs
- Therapeutic exercises.

### A Word of Caution...

Although most states require that home health care agencies perform criminal background checks on their workers and carefully screen job applicants for these positions, the actual regulations will vary depending on where you live. Therefore, before contacting a home health care agency, you may want to call your local area agency on aging or department of public health to learn what laws apply in your state.



## How Can I Pay for Home Health Care?

The cost of home health care varies across states and within states. In addition, costs will fluctuate depending on the type of health care professional required. Home care services can be paid for directly by the patient and his or her family members, or through a variety of public and private sources. Sources for home health care funding include Medicare, Medicaid, the Older Americans Act, the Veterans' Administration, and private insurance. To learn more about paying for home care visit <http://www.nahc.org/consumer/FAQs/whopays.html>

## Where Can I Learn More About Home Health Care?

There are several national organizations that can provide additional consumer information about home health care services. These include the following:

- The National Association for Home Care, which can be reached at 202-547-7424 or by visiting its website at <http://www.nahc.org>.
- The Visiting Nurse Associations of America, which can be reached at 202-384-1420 or by visiting its website at <http://www.vnaa.org>.

To find out more about home health care programs where you live, you will want to contact your local aging information and assistance provider or area agency on aging (AAA). The Eldercare Locator, a public service of the Administration on Aging (at 1-800-677-1116 or <http://www.eldercare.gov>) can help connect you to these agencies.

