



Guide to Memory Care and Dementia Communities

A family caregiver's guide to long-term care
options for seniors with Alzheimer's or other
forms of dementia

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What is Memory Care?

Memory care is a special kind of care provided to those with varying degrees of dementia. Also called Alzheimer's special care units or dementia care communities, these residential facilities are designed to meet the specific needs of individuals with Alzheimer's and other dementias.

They can take many forms and exist within various types of residential care, including [assisted living communities](#),¹ but typically include trained staff, specialized activities, and the ability of staff to care for residents with behavioral needs.

Although assisted living communities may have memory care units on campus, the two types of care are not synonymous. Memory care is a distinct form of long-term skilled nursing that specifically caters to patients with dementia and other types of memory problems.

¹ <https://info.highgateseniorliving.com/guide-to-assisted-living-facilities-ebook>

6 Common Features of a Memory Care Community

1. Services

Both memory care and assisted living offer basic supervised care; medical monitoring; help with [daily activities](#)² such as dressing, mobility, and hygiene; nutritious meals; housekeeping; laundry; transportation; and more. But memory care communities often offer additional structured activities or programs designed to nurture residents with [Alzheimer's](#)³ or dementia.

Memory care services are beneficial not only to people with dementia but also to their families. Knowing that your loved one has trained 24-hour care gives families peace of mind and helps relieve the caregiving burden.

2. Safety

Memory care and dementia communities have specific features in place to keep residents safe. For example, memory care units do not have individual kitchens for their residents, and they put an extra emphasis on security to prevent patients from wandering, which is common in those with more advanced dementia. Additionally, some communities offer an outdoor enclosed courtyard so residents can explore without getting lost.

Because memory care is a specialized treatment option for those who suffer from dementia, the communities report many improvements in resident safety factors, including fewer emergency room visits, fewer incidents involving violent behaviors, and reduced medication and medication side effects.

3. Staff Members

The staff at quality memory care communities are specially-trained professionals who receive initial and ongoing training so they understand

2 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/slideshow-what-are-activities-of-daily-living-anyway>

3 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/5-things-you-didnt-know-about-alzheimers-disease>

how the disease manifests, why dementia patients may exhibit disruptive behavior, [how to respond to it](#),⁴ and how to communicate with individuals with dementia. Additionally, memory care units usually require a higher staff-to-patient ratio to adequately provide the care needed for one with dementia.

Whether it's nighttime wandering, confusion, repetitive questions, incontinence, or just wanting "to go home," the staff at memory care and dementia communities should understand and have the expertise to handle these concerns.

4. Care

Recently, training has moved from an impairment-based practice to an abilities-based practice, which empowers memory care staff to provide person-centered care. Specialized care and service programming should be centered around a resident's unique needs, preferences, abilities, and interests.

5. Environment

Because individuals with dementia may easily become stressed and confused, there is a special emphasis on creating a relaxing environment in memory care units. The hallways might be color-coded to assist with navigation and reduce anxiety in residents. Additionally, many communities look similar to private homes with areas that residents can perform normal, everyday activities.

6. Activities

Social engagement and [involvement in meaningful activities](#)⁵ is one of the critical elements of good dementia care. In addition to leisure programs, therapeutic activities that address memory impairment, wandering, and other common dementia behaviors help residents maintain their functional

4 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/what-makes-highgates-positive-approach-to-memory-care-unique>

5 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/six-ways-to-keep-seniors-with-alzheimers-active-and-engaged>

abilities and can enhance quality of life. These stimulating activities help stir memories, foster emotional connections with others, encourage self-expression, lessen the anxiety and irritability that dementia may bring, and make people with Alzheimer’s feel more engaged with life.





When Is It Time for Memory Care?

Dementia is a progressive brain disease, which means it worsens over time. Although it affects people in different ways, it typically progresses through three general stages: mild (early-stage), moderate (middle-stage), and severe (late-stage).

Mild or Early Stage

In the early stage of dementia, a person may function independently. They may still [drive](#),⁶ work, and be part of social activities while also experiencing forgetfulness, losing or misplacing things, and difficulty finding the right words. Although it is not uncommon to occasionally experience these memory problems as one ages, they become disturbing when they occur more frequently and begin to interfere with the individual's daily life and activities.

⁶ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/driving-and-dementia-when-should-dementia-patients-stop-driving>

Moderate or Middle Stage

In this stage — typically the longest stage — individuals are more likely to experience increased confusion, greater memory loss, and worsening judgment. It's during this stage that they're likely to begin to need more assistance. You might notice that they need help with basic daily tasks, such as dressing, bathing, and grooming, and changes in sleep patterns as well as in their personality and behavior even though they may still remember significant details about their life.

Severe or Late Stage

In the final stage of the illness, declines in physical functioning begin to parallel the declines in cognitive functioning. Individuals may need round-the-clock assistance with daily activities and personal care, lose awareness of recent experiences as well as of their surroundings, experience changes in physical abilities, have increasing difficulty communicating, and become vulnerable to infections, especially pneumonia.



Over time, not only may caregivers begin to feel their loved ones have more specialized needs that aren't being met, but also they may indicate substantial emotional, financial, and physical difficulties personally from the [devastating toll dementia takes on caregivers](https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/why-dementia-caregivers-experience-higher-levels-of-stress-and-burnout).⁷

⁷ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/why-dementia-caregivers-experience-higher-levels-of-stress-and-burnout>

A good rule of thumb is that there is no downside to moving into memory care too soon. However, there are many drawbacks to waiting too long. If your loved one requires a higher level of care but you decide to wait, the number of things that can potentially go wrong are endless.

The questions below may be helpful when determining if a move to residential care a good option:

- 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?
- 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 memory care community benefit the person with dementia?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, it is time to start visiting memory care and dementia communities.



How Do You Find a Quality Memory Care Community?

When choosing a memory care community, there are a number of factors to consider, including the staff, the community, the programs, and the type of treatment residents receive. What's most important is that you find a care community that is closely aligned with their needs.

To determine this, you'll need to plan on visiting several care communities, keeping in mind you may see some things that might make you uncomfortable. Here are some tips.

Follow Your Nose

Does the community feel fresh and clean? Look past the furnishings and into the corners, baseboards, and windows. Resident rooms should be clean and spacious, and the facility should be free of unpleasant odors. Ask how often housekeeping is provided in personal living spaces. Get full details on

the types of maintenance provided and the estimated response times. Don't forget to ask if residents are allowed to [bring familiar items with them](#),⁸ such as photos, bedding, and a chair.

Visit During an Activity

It's a good idea to try and schedule your tour in conjunction with a community event. Ask if you can watch the activities or even participate. Are the activities and events well-attended? Does the staff seem to be enjoying the activity as well? If you can't visit during a planned activity, ask to see the activity schedule and take a look at the community calendar of events. Do they match your loved one's interests? Do they include trips and outings away from the community?

Pay Attention to the Staff

The attitude and friendliness of the staff are critical. Make sure that you observe several staff members interacting with current residents. Do they [recognize persons with dementia as unique individuals](#)?⁹ Is care personalized to meet specific needs, abilities, and interests? Make sure to get a good understanding of the staffing pattern. How many people are actually involved in residents' care? Can staff handle challenging behaviors? What is the ratio of residents to staff?

Enjoy a Meal

When visiting communities, it is important to discuss meal choices and learn about dining hours, options, and procedures. Are the staff able to provide for any special dietary needs? Can they provide appropriate assistance based on person's abilities, such as encouragement during meals or assisted feeding

8 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/5-ways-to-make-moms-new-assisted-living-apartment-feel-like-home>

9 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/what-makes-highgates-positive-approach-to-memory-care-unique>

in advanced stages? If you can, enjoy a meal at the property. Not only is it a great way to ensure the food is appetizing and the dining environment is pleasant, but it also opens up a great opportunity to meet some of the residents.

Get Feedback from Residents

Ask residents and families for their honest opinions about the community. Are they encouraged to participate in care planning? Are families informed of changes in their loved one's condition and care needs? Don't forget to ask to see [the latest survey or inspection report](#),¹⁰ which facilities are required to provide. The report and the disclosure form can give you a picture of the facility's services.

If you were happy with the scheduled tour, make one or two unannounced visits, too, to confirm the atmosphere is as positive as it was during your scheduled visit.

Here are some questions the [Alzheimer's Association](#)¹¹ recommends asking to help make the decision easier.

- Are families encouraged to participate in care planning?
- How are families informed of changes in the resident's condition and care needs?
- How often are physicians and nurse practitioners on premises? Is there a registered nurse on-site at all time?
- Is staff trained in dementia care? How long is the training, and what topics are covered?
- On average, how long have workers been on staff?

¹⁰ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/how-assisted-living-facilities-are-regulated>

¹¹ <https://www.alz.org/>

- ❑ How does staff handle challenging behaviors?
- ❑ What is the ratio of residents to staff?
- ❑ Do planned activities take place? Are activities designed to meet specific needs, interests, and abilities?
- ❑ Which therapies (e.g., physical, occupational, speech, recreational) are offered?
- ❑ Are religious services and celebrations available to residents?
- ❑ Is personal care done with respect and dignity?
- ❑ Is there flexibility in personal care times based on an individual's schedule?
- ❑ Are indoor and outdoor areas safe and secure?
- ❑ Are residents allowed to bring familiar items?
- ❑ Is there flexibility in meal times based on the individual's personal schedule?
- ❑ Are family and friends able to join at mealtime?
- ❑ Does staff provide appropriate assistance based on person's abilities?
Is continuing care available within the community as a resident's needs change?
- ❑ Is there an aging in place policy where residents can remain in the community throughout the course of the disease?
- ❑ Does the facility provide end-of-life care?



This guide is brought to you by Highgate Senior Living, an industry-leading assisted living and memory care provider offering a holistic approach to care. Pioneering change in the senior living industry, Highgate is committed to creating a unique and desirable living option where each resident can live a life of purpose.

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