

EXPLORING SENIOR LIVING ALTERNATIVES

Whether you've experienced a serious health issue, want expanded social connections or simply don't want to keep up with home maintenance, finding a senior living alternative is part of the aging process. In fact, 75 percent of seniors will require outside care in their lifetime, so even if you aren't ready just yet to make a move, it's good to have a senior housing plan. It's also important to choose senior housing based on your health, social and financial needs.

As you begin researching potential senior living options, think about the services you need. Asking yourself the following questions will help you get a clearer picture of your future needs:

- Do I want to stay in the home I have now or move to another? Can I stay put but use additional senior care?
- Am I looking for a place I can stay for the duration of my life or simply for the next life stage?
- How much can I afford to spend on housing?
- Can I live with a family member or friend? Would I feel comfortable doing this?
- What kind of health care will I need at my home?
- What are the safety and risk factors in my current living situation?
- What type of social needs or interests do I want my living situation to fulfill?

It's also important to consider your daily activities, such as eating, dressing, using the bathroom and getting in and out of bed. Your ability to do these activities, plus others such as banking, shopping, cleaning, cooking, using the telephone and taking medication, may limit your senior living options. If you can perform these activities with ease, you have more options. If you have trouble moving around, eating or using the bathroom, an assisted living or continuing care retirement community may be a better choice.

Senior living alternatives are generally distinguished by the level of care needed. Naturally, as the level of care, staff credentials and ratio of staff to residents increases, so do costs. Costs vary by facility and region, and depend on your health insurance coverage and if you qualify for Medicare or Medicaid. Finding the ideal senior living situation is usually a matter of balancing financial and health considerations. While you don't want to sacrifice care for budgeting concerns, it's also important to not let senior care burn through all of your retirement savings.

Seventy-five percent of seniors will require outside care in their lifetime. Even if you aren't ready now to make a move, it's good to have a senior housing plan.

After considering your senior care needs, it's time to look into your senior living options. These include the following:

Aging in place:

This involves growing older without having to move from one's current residence in order to secure necessary support services. This also allows for the additional option of in-home care, if necessary. Aging in place is best for those whose home is comfortably equipped for an aging person (one-level, wide doorways and hallways, not a lot of maintenance, etc.) and who are able to easily perform most daily activities.

Living with family or friends:

This option is ideal for those who require more support but do not have the financial means to pay for a formal senior housing option. Living with a family member or friend can help you feel more comfortable knowing you are not alone should a crisis occur. This also allows for in-home care.

Downsizing your home:

Moving to a smaller or more manageable home can help to lower the burden of home maintenance tasks. It can also provide additional retirement income from selling your home and moving to a smaller space.

Senior housing/independent senior living:

This alternative provides a range of options, from congregate housing to home sharing, adult foster care, or board and care homes. Senior housing allows you to maintain an independent lifestyle while also offering a moderate level of help, should you want it. This option is best for active seniors who are still able to care for themselves but want the benefits of available senior services. This option also can provide substantial social benefits, as it provides a community of seniors who share similar interests.

Continuing care retirement communities:

These residential campuses provide a number of senior services. They combine several other senior living alternatives (independent living, assisted living and nursing home care) into a continuum of care, so you can move through levels of care while still staying within the same community. This eliminates the need to find another housing option if you have a change in your need for care, plus allows you to keep developing relationships you make within the community.

Assisted living:

Assisted living is a hybrid of independent living and nursing home care, where residents can continue to live independently but also have access to a higher level of assistance than independent senior living. This can include providing meals, housekeeping services, laundry, dressing/grooming assistance, medication management, transportation and social/recreational activities.

Nursing homes:

Nursing homes provide 24-hour skilled care for residents. They offer the same kinds of services as assisted living, but to a larger extent. This is an ideal alternative for seniors who don't need to be in a hospital but cannot receive the level of care they need at home.

Above all, when considering senior living alternatives, start the research and decision-making processes sooner rather than later. It's important to develop a strategy for relocation early on so that if a health crisis happens, you know your options and are ready to make a transition. This can help you avoid additional stress after a health complication. Talk with your family now about the options available and any additional caretaking or financial responsibility family members may need to take on if your living situation changes.

The National Association of Area Agencies on Aging provides a valuable resource called the "Senior Housing Locator," which allows you to search for senior living alternatives in your area. For more information, visit www.n4a.org.

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