

How to Complain to a Nursing Home

There are those who believe that by being visible and vocal, they can get the best care for their loved one and ensure their safety. Other family members believe that any complaint will lead to retaliation against their loved one.

Complaining can work very successfully under the right circumstances. It requires great strength and professionalism on the part of the family members. Those who are quiet, never question, and never ask for anything could set the stage for abuse and neglect.

How you approach problems in a nursing home depends on how pervasive the problem is in a facility. If problems are isolated, a well-placed complaint may do the trick.

If your loved one is in a facility where abuse and neglect is the order of the day, contact an elder advocate to either move them or monitor their care.

Before You File A Complaint With The Nursing Home...

There are definite activities you can do... and steps you can take... to eliminate the potential need to complain. They are:

- Familiarize yourself with the staff directly responsible for the care of your loved one.
- Be friendly and professional. Let them know that you are there to help them take care of your relative. You are not just shifting the responsibility to them.
- When a compliment is deserved, give it. (But if it is not genuine, don't compliment.)
- Be visible. Visit often and at different times
- Familiarize yourself with your loved ones medical condition, history, and care plan.
- Document everything very carefully. Make sure to record dates, time, conditions, or anything else distinctive.
- Do as much of the small things for your loved one as you can. If you are visiting and mom has to go to the bathroom, take her. Don't buzz for a nurse's aide. The more you do for your loved one when you visit, the better. You should not become a full time caregiver, but be willing to partner with the staff.
- Make sure that the medical team taking care of your loved one knows who you are. Share your information with them. Again, let them know that you want to partner with them. Let them know that you are very much involved.
- Become a member of the family council. Every facility must have one by law.
- Know your rights. A resident bill of rights can be obtained on the net or is posted at the facility.
- Don't become an advocate for other residents. If you feel compelled to speak out, call the Department of Health anonymously and tell them what is going on at the facility.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff.” In other words, don’t complain about a meal, not enough towels, or a few lost items in the laundry. A lost sock among hundreds is to be expected. Save your complaints for serious stuff.

When It’s Serious And You Are Ready To File A Formal Complaint...

Before you file a complaint, make sure you have your facts straight and that you have sufficiently documented as much as you can about the problem.

- Put your complaint in writing.
- Don’t threaten action. Take action
- Be calm and professional.
- Use the chain of command. Don’t run to the head of a department before you have spoken to a supervisor first.
- Be very specific about your complaint. No “he said, she said.”
- Ask for a meeting to discuss the issues. At the meeting take notes about who attended, and what was discussed. Pledge to work with the staff to resolve issues.
- After you have filed a complaint, do not discuss it with anyone on the staff. If you complained about a staff member, don’t discuss it with that staff member. Don’t be apologetic about your complaint.
- Give the nursing home an opportunity to investigate and take appropriate action.
- Be very vigilant for changes in your relative’s condition. Visit at odd times. Relatives are not subject to set visiting hours according to the law.

When Filing A Complaint With The Department Of Health...

When all else fails, your best plan of action could be to file a formal written complaint with the Department of Health.

- Make sure that your complaint is well documented and in writing.
- Send your complaint by Certified Mail, return receipt requested.
- Send a copy of the complaint to the administrator of the facility, Certified Mail, return receipt requested.
- Make sure the Department of Health provides you with a case number. Without it, your case might get lost and you have no way to follow up.

Jack Halpern, [My Elder](#) provides elder advocacy services to families.

