

How to Choose the Best Caregiver for Your Loved One

This step-by-step guide can help to ensure your loved one gets the appropriate care for his or her needs.

By **Brenda Kimble**

WHEN A LOVED one is diagnosed with a chronic illness, the automatic response is to support that person in any way possible. Running errands? Check. Keeping house? Check. Helping with treatments? Check. But taking on caregiving duties yourself might not be the right path to follow. Research shows that when a loved one becomes a caregiver, his or her own mental, physical and emotional health tend to suffer. Caregiving can also damage the personal relationship you have with your loved one. And, depending on your own situation, it might not even be a possibility.

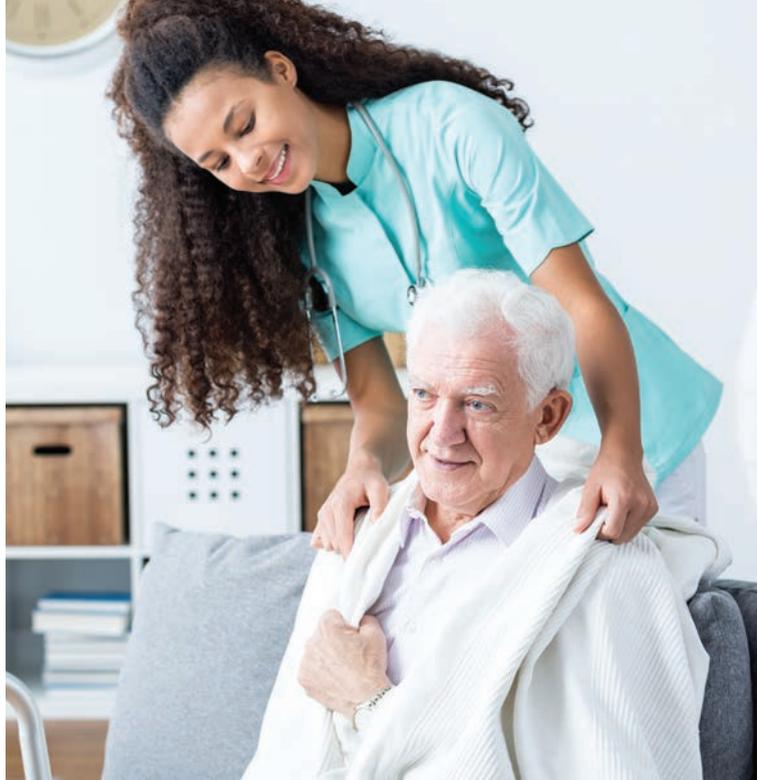
Thankfully, there are a lot of excellent in-home caregiving options. Hiring a professional caregiver allows you to support your loved one and ensure he or she is well cared for without sacrificing other important areas of your life such as family, work and your own health.

Follow this step-by-step guide to choose the best in-home caregiver for your loved one.

Step 1. Determine the Type of Care Your Loved One Needs

One of the best reasons to opt for in-home care is it's entirely customizable to your loved one's situation. You can tailor the type and amount of care your loved one receives based on the chronic illness, the progression of symptoms, the treatment plan, how much assistance is required and more.

To determine exactly what your loved one needs help with, sit down for a discussion and include any other individuals who are routinely assisting. Together, make a list of broad areas and specific tasks where assistance is needed today. Here's a list of some basic proficiencies to consider:



- Safely working through daily exercises, breathing therapy or physical rehabilitation
- Completing household chores such as cleaning and cooking
- Administering medical care and routine treatments
- Personal care such as showering, dressing and going to the bathroom
- Transportation to run errands and go to appointments
- Navigating the world, in terms of mobility or communication

As you discuss the possibilities, keep in mind the need to assess your loved one's current physical and cognitive abilities, capability to navigate the home and outside world safely, and social life.

It might be beneficial for you to meet with the doctor (or doctors) managing your loved one's treatment plan. They'll be able to point out considerations you might not have considered, including how your loved one's illness might progress and the kinds of care they're likely to need in the coming months and years.

Step 2. Evaluate Caregiving Options to Choose the Right One for Your Loved One's Situation

Selecting an in-home caregiver can be a daunting task since there are so many options to explore. There are two different avenues you'll need to consider: 1) the type of caregiving your loved one needs (i.e., a registered nurse versus a health aide) and 2) the method of finding and paying for your caregiver of choice (i.e., referrals versus agency).

With a comprehensive list of your loved one's caregiving needs, as well as a careful analysis of your current budget and funding sources, you should be able to narrow down the options outlined below.

1) What type of caregiver does your loved one need?

Mostly help with personal care, assistance around the house and running errands. Nonmedical supportive care is the least expensive in-home caregiving option, but it's also nearly always an out-of-pocket expense not covered by your loved one's health insurance. However, the low cost comes with a caveat: They aren't licensed, and there are few training requirements.

These caregivers are called personal care assistants (PCA). They can be hired by the hour for part- or full-time work, and their services include personal hygiene and assistance around the house, as well as housekeeping, errand-running and companionship.

Healthcare-oriented tasks and personal care help. There are a few types of certified healthcare providers who are trained to offer different levels of care.

The home health aide, or HHA, is the first level. These aides complete basic nursing tasks (i.e., taking vitals and monitoring your loved one's condition), while also providing company, helping with personal hygiene and taking care of basic housekeeping tasks. An HHA tends to be covered by Medicare if their service is provided in coordination with other more-specialized care.

Beyond the HHA is the licensed nursing assistant and the certified nursing assistant, both of whom can provide a range of specialized nursing care at the direction of a registered nurse (RN).

A variety of different kinds of help — and someone to manage it all. Many patients with chronic illnesses have complex situations that benefit from having different caregivers to meet different needs. This is particularly true for those with progressive diseases like pulmonary fibrosis, heart disease and dementia.

RNs often function as case managers in a home care setting. This means that in addition to delivering hands-on healthcare, they also develop care plans for their patients and manage other caregivers such as physical therapists and HHAs. This care — and the management of it all — should be covered by Medicare.

2) What methods are available to find and work with your loved one's caregiver?

Use a referral. You might be able to find quality basic care by asking people in your social and professional circles about their experience. If you trust their recommendation, this can be a great way to find a PCA or to get leads for the following two options.

Try a registry. Registries are listings of certified or licensed caregivers in your area. Some are compiled by locale, others by state and still others by care specialty or experience level. You can contact the individual directly and arrange an interview yourself.

Work with an agency. An agency handles all the legal, financial and management items, which can be a godsend for individuals who require a complicated care plan. Agencies also lay the groundwork. They'll find the caregiver specialists your loved one needs and ensure they have the right amount of experience and the appropriate licensing.

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Step 3. Choose the Best Caregiver

The last step is deciding on the best fit for your loved one's needs. Meeting with potential caregivers for an in-person interview will help you make this determination.

Essentially, picking the right caregiver for your loved one is much like making other serious decisions. You'll need to consider everything from experience to cost to chemistry. However, keep in mind that with caregiving, chemistry is incredibly important. While you should never sacrifice training or experience for character, you do need to remember that caregiving is an intimate, long-term relationship. Your loved one needs to work well with the caregiver to get the most out of in-home care. 

BRENDA KIMBLE is a writer and caregiver based in Austin, Texas.