

Assisted Living vs. Memory Care: What's the Difference?

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If you're looking for long-term care for an aging loved one, you're probably faced with a difficult decision. Senior living varies greatly in terms of levels of care, amenities, staff training, and cost.

About 70% of adults older than 65 will need long-term care at some point in their lives, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Many who require senior care will have some type of cognitive decline or memory loss. In fact, over 55 million people worldwide have dementia, and nearly 10 million new cases are diagnosed each year, according to the World Health Organization.

Assisted living and memory care facilities are two popular and fast-growing types of senior living, but what's the difference between these two options? Before deciding between assisted living and memory care, it's important to learn about the unique benefits each care level offers.



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Understanding the difference between assisted living and memory care

Memory care and assisted living communities provide many of the same services, including housing, meals, and help with activities of daily living (ADLs) like bathing, grooming, and using the toilet. However, memory care also specializes in caring for seniors with memory loss, Alzheimer's disease, and other forms of dementia.

Here are five key areas where assisted living and memory care differ.

1. Safety

Assisted living communities may offer safety features like in-room emergency alert systems and daily check-ins. For seniors with memory loss, increased cognitive skills, a sense of self, and quality of life for as long as possible. Beyond developing nursing care plans tailored to the individual needs of a resident with dementia, staff may also follow best practices for a memory care community.

Environmental security is a key design characteristic of memory care facilities. For example, this could mean features such as:

- Locked entrances and exits
- Keypad entries
- Obscured exits
- Doorbells that signal entering and exiting

To avoid injuries from falls, facility layouts include design elements that minimize confusion. Plus, memory care communities offer calming therapies within soothing spaces to reduce agitation and confusion that may lead to aggression or self-injury.

2. Staff training and care

Staff members at both assisted living and memory care facilities have experience supporting residents with day-to-day tasks.

But staff at memory care facilities are well-equipped and trained to provide 24-hour, person-centered care that helps seniors with dementia maintain cognitive skills, a sense of self, and quality of life for as long as possible. Beyond developing nursing care plans tailored to the individual needs of a resident with dementia, staff may also follow best practices for a memory care community.

Caregivers at memory care facilities know how to effectively and compassionately prevent and manage difficult dementia behaviors, such as wandering and aggression. They also understand the balance of encouraging residents to stay as independent as possible while providing the support they need.

Plus, with a generally higher staff-to-resident ratio than assisted living and other senior care types, memory care gives residents more one-on-one attention throughout the day.

3. Amenities

Amenities vary greatly from one community to the next, but many assisted living communities offer:

- Gyms
- Beauty salons and barber shops
- Outdoor spaces like gardens or courtyards
- Pet-friendly accommodations
- Transportation services
- Library and game room
- Arts and crafts studio
- Spas or relaxation rooms

Memory care communities often feature many of these same amenities, but most importantly, you'll find unique layouts and design features to help orient residents and reduce confusion. For instance, design elements in memory care communities may include:

- Clearly defined common areas
- Color-coded walls to make it easier for those with memory loss to find their way
- Outdoor gardens to prevent patients from feeling trapped or confined
- Increased opportunities for personalization, like memory boxes outside of residents' doors to guide them and make them feel at home

Who are you researching for?

Parent

Spouse

Someone Else

Myself

1 of 5

4. Activities and therapies

Assisted living staff organize communities around active seniors who may need some help with everyday tasks. With this demographic in mind, assisted living offers plenty of social opportunities. Even better, a wide range of planned activities — including exercise classes, book clubs, games, bingo, karaoke, outings, and more — is often available to appeal to different interests.

Memory care offers both group and individual memory care activities and therapies specially designed for seniors with memory loss. Caregivers design activities to help maintain cognitive skills and schedule calendars carefully to provide a sense of comfort and routine for residents.

Many memory care facilities provide personalized care, activities tailored to residents' interests, and programs that often encompass all aspects of health: the physical, mental, and spiritual.

Therapies at memory care communities may include:

- **Music therapy**, which promotes relaxation and reduces agitation in seniors with Alzheimer's or other types of dementia
- Art therapy, which may help slow cognitive decline
- **Reminiscence therapy**, which uses senses like smell, taste, touch, and sight to help seniors remember people, events, and places
- Pet therapy for companionship

5. Costs

Many factors affect the cost of assisted living and memory care, including location, room size, whether a space is shared, and what services are provided. Beyond that, costs are calculated a little differently for each care type.

- **Assisted living communities** generally charge a base monthly rate, which covers room and board with three meals a day, most activities (outings may cost extra), weekly housekeeping, and transportation to and from medical appointments. Help with ADLs is often an additional charge, depending on how much assistance a resident needs. The median monthly cost of assisted living for a one-bedroom apartment was \$4,500 a month in 2021, according to a cost of care survey by Genworth, an insurance company with a focus on long-term care. However, cost varies based on the community and location, and pricing may range anywhere from \$3,000 to \$6,978 a month.
- **Memory care communities** or units offer specialized care and nursing services that assisted living communities typically don't offer. This means the cost of memory care tends to be higher, with a median monthly price of \$5,430 in 2021. However, cost varies based on the community and location, and pricing may range anywhere from \$2,500 or less to \$12,000 or more a month.



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Assisted living vs. memory care: What services are offered?

Services	Assisted Living	Memory Care
Help with ADLs	x	x
Meal service	x	x
Medication management	x	x
Care coordination	x	x
Housekeeping and laundry services	x	x
Exercise classes	x	x
Transportation to appointments	x	x
Specialized care for dementia and memory loss		x
24-hour care and supervision		x
Secured entrances and exits to prevent wandering		x
Memory-enhanced therapies		x
High staff-to-patient ratio		x
Unique layouts to reduce confusion		x

Who can benefit from assisted living?

Older adults who are active but may need nutritious meals and help with ADLs can benefit from assisted living. Moreover, seniors who wish for a convenient and maintenance-free lifestyle — with opportunities to stay engaged and connected with a community of like-minded peers — can also enjoy the lifestyle provided at an assisted living community.

Who can benefit from memory care?

Some seniors with early- to middle-stage dementia may do well at an assisted living facility, but as the disease progresses and symptoms worsen, many families opt for memory care. Importantly, the security and physical layout of memory care facilities provide for a pleasant, safe environment that's easy to navigate, which helps reduce confusion and agitation.

Memory-enhancing therapies and the specialized care available at these communities help seniors with memory loss maintain their cognitive skills for as long as possible. Seniors with memory loss also benefit from round-the-clock care and supervision, enhanced security measures, and secured entrances and exits to prevent wandering.

Combining memory care and assisted living

It's also possible to find memory care within an assisted living facility. Many assisted living communities have specialized care units for residents with dementia or Alzheimer's.

These units usually provide 24-hour supervised care in a separate wing or floor of a residential community, along with all the therapies and amenities of memory care. So, a senior with early-stage dementia may be able to move to an assisted living residence first and then transition to the memory care level later if needed.

This option may ease the move to memory care and enable seniors to maintain friendships and staff relationships from their previous assisted living environment.

How to decide between assisted living and memory care

Assisted living may be a good fit for your loved one if memory loss is not an immediate concern. It's a great choice for seniors who are relatively independent and social but may require some help throughout the day.

However, if cognitive decline is a concern, ask yourself these questions to determine the best fit for your aging relative:

- Does my loved one with Alzheimer's or another type of dementia wander frequently?
- Do they show combative behavior such as yelling or hitting?
- Does my relative need a lot of direction throughout the day?
- Do they take things that don't belong to them?
- Does my loved one need 24-hour supervision?
- Does my aging relative experience sundown syndrome?
- Does my family member need a lot of help with mobility? Do they walk independently, or do they require a walker or wheelchair they can't use on their own?
- Do they get lost in familiar places?
- Does my loved one forget to shut or lock doors?
- Do they leave on stoves or create other fire hazards?
- Has their judgment become impaired to the point where they're inappropriate in their dress, speech, or behavior?
- Has my loved one become withdrawn?
- Do they continuously misplace objects or have to retrace their steps?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions and are worried about your loved one's safety, memory care might be an appropriate option for your family member.

Next steps as you consider memory care

As you can see, assisted living and memory care are similar, but they differ in important ways. While weighing the benefits of both, it's important to learn about all of your options for senior living care.

Independent living, assisted living, memory care, and in-home care are all possibilities, and each offers unique services and amenities. So, if you find yourself asking, "Is memory care assisted living?" and other fundamental questions, these articles can help as you navigate the options:

- [Memory Care vs. Nursing Homes: What's the Difference?](#)
- [Memory Care vs. Home Care for Elderly Dementia](#)

Finding the best fit for your loved one is an important undertaking, and having a guide along the way can help. Consider contacting one of A Place for Mom's local experts — it's a free service. These Senior Living Advisors will listen to your family's needs and attempt to help you find the right senior care choice for your loved one.

Sources
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