

## What is home health care?

Imagine having a chronic condition such as heart failure or an acute condition like surgery for a hip replacement that requires specialized medical attention. With assistance from a home health care agency, you can receive professional medical care and education in the comfort of home to help you regain your health and independence.

In many cases, home health care permits a person to be discharged earlier from a hospital, reduces hospital admissions and assists with a more rapid recovery. In addition, it is usually less expensive, more convenient and just as effective as care from a hospital or skilled nursing facility.

## Who uses home health care services?

People of all ages, from newborns to those in their 100s, use home health care. The majority of care is provided to those age 65 and older. Some examples include those who:

- ◆ are able to be discharged from a hospital or nursing home but need additional care;
- ◆ are terminally ill and want to live their final days with dignity surrounded by their loved ones in the comfort of their own home;
- ◆ have short-term health needs; and
- ◆ need assistance, due to age or disability, to remain at home.

## Who provides home health care?

In California, there are two types of home health care agencies—certified agencies and private duty agencies. The majority of this booklet discusses certified care.

### ***Certified agencies***

Certified home health care agencies comply with Medicare and Medicaid regulations. The need for service typically arises after hospitalization or a significant change in medical condition. This type of care is also referred to as “skilled care” and is short-term and usually occurs over 60 days.

To qualify for certified home care, you must be homebound, need skilled nursing or therapy services and have a physician certify that you need this care. While a physician must prescribe care, ***the patient has the right to select the provider of his/her choice.***

Examples of skilled home health services include:

- ◆ wound care for pressure sores or a surgical wound;
- ◆ physical and occupational therapy;
- ◆ speech-language therapy;
- ◆ patient and caregiver education;
- ◆ intravenous or nutrition therapy;
- ◆ medication management; and
- ◆ monitoring serious illness and unstable health status.

Some agencies are accredited in addition to being certified. Two accrediting organizations are the Community Health Accreditation Program (CHAP) and The Joint Commission. Choosing an accredited agency means that organization conforms to national industry standards and provides an extra measure of quality and peace of mind to the consumer.

## **Private duty agencies**

Private duty or private pay agencies offer a variety of services including medical and nonmedical care. For example, private duty services, in addition to nursing, could include assistance with shopping, laundry, meals and companionship. The patient/family generally incur the cost of care, although some insurance plans may also cover all or a portion of it.

## **Weighing the costs of private duty care**

Greater numbers of consumers, who are dealing with chronic or debilitating health conditions, are turning to homecare rather than institutional care for their long-term care needs. Faced with a growing and sometimes bewildering number of choices, consumers may find it appealing to use companies that offer them the cheapest price for care without understanding the implications of their choice.

According to the National Private Duty Association, many consumers unknowingly hire organizations that do not employ or supervise their workers, but merely “place” them in homecare settings. As a result, unfortunate situations can arise for seniors and their families including being liable for income tax, Social Security, paying for care of the health care aide’s work-related injuries and possible exploitation and abuse of their loved one.

Private duty homecare can be a tremendous benefit to families and their loved ones. A little research can make a world of difference in the care of your loved one and your peace of mind.

## **How do I request home health service?**

A physician, patient or family member can request service. However, Medicare, Medicaid and most insurances require a physician’s prescription for certified home health care. Once the physician prescribes home health care, he/she authorizes a treatment plan, commonly called a “plan of care,” and periodically reviews services and the patient’s progress.

If a physician does not prescribe home health care, but the individual still desires services, a private duty agency can suggest a plan of care to meet a wide variety of needs and budgets.

## **What should I expect once home care service is ordered?**

Once your doctor refers you for home health services, the home health agency will schedule an appointment and come to your home to talk to you about your needs and ask you some questions about your health. The home health agency staff will also talk to your doctor about your care and keep your doctor updated about your progress. Doctor’s orders are needed to start care. It is important that home health staff see you as often as the doctor ordered.

Depending on your needs, you will have different members of the home care team come to your home. These visits typically last 60 minutes or less and are designed to supervise your condition and teach you and your caregivers what you need to know to self-manage your condition.

## Who is part of the home health care team?

With certified home health care, you have a team of caregivers working together to provide teaching, education and medical management to help you recover and self manage your condition once your episode of care ends. The home healthcare team consists of physicians, nurses, home health aides, medical social workers and therapists who coordinate an individualized plan of care based on your needs.

### **Physicians**

To receive Medicare or certified home health care services, your physician must authorize a coordinated treatment plan and periodically review the “plan of care”. Also, as part of Health Care Reform, your physician must have seen you in the office 30 days prior to beginning home care, or within 90 days after the start of care.

### **Nurses**

Nurses provide skilled services for the patient, supervise other caregivers and coordinate patient care with the physician. They also train family members and friends to assist the professional caregivers and to help with your care. The goal is to provide short term care that teaches you about your condition so that you can manage your care by yourself or with help from family and friends.

### **Home Health Aides**

Home health aides assist with your personal care needs and are supervised by a nurse from the home healthcare agency. Typical assistance may include bathing, dressing, grooming, companionship, meal preparation and light housekeeping.

### **Medical Social Workers**

Medical social workers assist the patient and family in a variety of ways by providing counseling services and directing them to other resources relevant to their situation. For example, social workers may help you obtain financial assistance, home-delivered meals or address emotional needs.

### **Therapists**

Physical, occupational, speech/language and respiratory therapists provide essential services based on individual needs. The therapist also may train other caregivers to assist the patient with exercises and routine care.

### **Other Home Health Care Services**

Dietary services, transportation, chore services, homemaker services, home-delivered meals, companionship, home medical equipment and intravenous therapy products are also available. Some services, such as transportation and homemaker services are not covered by Medicare and must be paid for privately.

### **Hospice**

Hospice services focus on keeping an individual as comfortable and pain free as possible when curative measures are no longer effective. Hospice services also assist the patient and family members with respite care and bereavement care. Additionally, hospice care addresses the patient's emotional and spiritual needs as well as links to community resources. Most home health care agencies can either provide hospice service or refer you to a hospice in your area.

## Who pays for care?

For certified agencies, Medicare and many other insurances cover all or a portion of care. You will need to check with your individual insurance carrier for your plan. For information about Medicare's home health benefit, including what's covered and whether you're eligible, read the booklet, [\*Medicare and Your Home Health Benefits\*](#).

## Patients' rights and responsibilities

Patients with a certified home health care agency have specific rights and responsibilities regarding their care. The Statement of Patient Rights is available through home health care agencies and in several languages through the California Home Health Association. Many non-certified home health care agencies have similar documents outlining their patients' rights and responsibilities. As a patient of a Medicare-approved home health agency, you have several rights, and the home health agency must provide you with a written copy of them. They include rights such as the following:

- ◆ the right to choose your home health agency (For members of managed care plans, the choices will depend upon which home health agencies your plan works with.)
- ◆ the right to have your property treated with respect
- ◆ the right to be given a copy of your plan of care, and participate in decisions about your care
- ◆ the right to have your family or guardian act for you if you are unable
- ◆ the right to make complaints to the agency or the State Survey Agency about your treatment, care that's not provided or staff who show disrespect for you or your property

## How do I choose the right agency?

When faced with critical health decisions, we all want to make sure our loved one is receiving the best care. Often, patients are not informed that they have a choice and do not know where to begin when given a list of names from their physician or hospital. There are important differences between agencies.

The California Home Health Association is an excellent resource and can be contacted at (916) 641-5795. Other resources include friends, hospital discharge departments, your physician, public health departments, telephone directories under "homecare," "home healthcare" or "nursing" or through website search engines using similar headings.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) also offers a tool called [Home Health Compare](#) on its website at [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov). Home Health Compare contains a comprehensive listing of Medicare-certified home health agencies across the nation. The tool shows how individual agencies compare on different measures of quality care and service related to national benchmarks. Individuals using Home Health Compare are urged to use this as just one tool in their decision-making process and to not use these figures as their sole basis of a selection. Medicare.gov will also be adding a rating for the patient's perception of quality from an organization so that you can get a sense of the organization from people who have already received services.

Below are some questions to ask a home healthcare agency to find one that best meets your needs.

- 1. Is there a written plan of care for services?** Does it include duties to be performed, by whom, at what intervals and for how long? Will it be explained to the family? Can you review it?
- 2. Does the agency provide written statements describing its services, eligibility requirements, fees and funding sources?** Do the admission documents outline client services, fees and admission guidelines? Does the marketing brochure or annual report offer helpful guidance on the agency?
- 3. Is the agency Medicare certified?** Medicare certification is a measure of quality because that agency has met Federal requirements. You can review the agency's Medicare Survey Report at your local Social Security Office. However, non-participation in Medicare does not indicate that an agency provides poor care. For example, Medicare certification is not applicable for home medical equipment companies or private duty agencies.
- 4. Is the agency accredited?** Accreditation is a voluntary process that means that the agency has met basic standards, including personnel requirements, supervision and accountability. Agencies that provide skilled nursing services may be accredited by the Community Health Accreditation Program (CHAP) and/or The Joint Commission.
- 5. Does the agency send supervisors to visit the home and evaluate the quality of care periodically?**
- 6. How does the agency choose and train its employees?**

## **Am I getting quality home health care?**

This yes/no checklist from Medicare.gov can help you monitor the quality of the home health care you receive:

1. The staff is polite and treats me and my family with respect.
2. The staff explains my plan of care to me and my family, lets us participate in creating the plan of care, and lets us know ahead of time of any changes.
3. The staff is properly trained and licensed to perform the type of health care I need.
4. The agency explains what to do if I have a problem with the staff or the care I'm getting.
5. The agency responds quickly to my requests.
6. The staff checks my physical and emotional condition at each visit.
7. The staff responds quickly to changes in my health or behavior.
8. The staff checks my home and suggests changes to meet my special needs and to ensure my safety.
9. The staff has told me what to do if I have an emergency.
10. The agency and its staff protect my privacy.

## **California Association for Health Services at Home**

[www.CAHTSAH.com](http://www.CAHTSAH.com)

The California Association for Health Services at Home (CAHTSAH) is the leading statewide home care association in the nation and the voice of home care for the western United States. CAHTSAH represents more than 584 members and 1,031 offices that are direct providers of health and supportive services and products in the home. Our provider members represent Medicare-certified home health agencies, licensed home health agencies, hospices, private duty organizations, home medical equipment providers, home infusion pharmacy providers and interdisciplinary professional services. The affiliate members include computer companies, consulting firms, insurance providers, and suppliers home healthcare services.

In addition, CAHTSAH:

- ◆ sponsors and promotes educational programs, cost-savings projects and research in home healthcare;
- ◆ promotes understanding, cooperation and communication among home healthcare providers; and
- ◆ serves as a liaison with other organizations at local, state and national levels.

## **Medicare**

[www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov)

Find information about your Medicare benefit and compare the quality of home health care organizations with its “Home Health Compare” tool.

## **National Association of Homecare (NAHC)**

[www.nahc.org](http://www.nahc.org)

NAHC is the nation’s largest trade association representing the interests and concerns of home health care agencies, hospices, homecare aide organizations and medical equipment suppliers.

## Medicare fraud: Protect yourself

A trusted, reputable home health care agency can help you reclaim your health and independence. While most agencies are honest, there are others who are not. They can put you at risk.

### Beware of:

- ◆ home health care providers that use telephone calls, door-to-door solicitation, or pressure tactics as a way to sell you goods or services. Medicare-certified home health care services are provided through a physician or a hospital discharge planner, and you should be told that these services were ordered
- ◆ unknown home health care providers who say they represent Medicare or the Federal government and request your Social Security or Medicare number

### Be suspicious if the provider tells you that:

- ◆ the test or service is FREE, but they need your Medicare number for their records

### Protect yourself:

- ◆ If someone knocks on your door unexpectedly and says they are from Medicare or a home care agency and that they need you to give them your Medicare number or Social Security card, or offer you something, shut the door.
- ◆ Know if your physician ordered home care services or equipment for you. If he or she did order home care, know what types of services have been prescribed and ask for the name of the company that will be providing care.
- ◆ Check the “plan of care” developed by the home care agency to see if you are receiving the type of services ordered by your doctor.
- ◆ Carefully review your insurer’s Explanation of the Benefits statement. Ensure that services billed match the services that were provided. Call your insurer and provider if you have questions.
- ◆ Keep accurate records of all health care appointments.
- ◆ If your Medicare card is lost or stolen, report it right away. Call Social Security at 1-800-772-1213 (TTY 1-800-325-0778) for a replacement. If you get benefits from the Railroad Retirement Board, call 1-877-772 5772, or visit [www.rrb.gov](http://www.rrb.gov).

If you suspect Medicare fraud, contact  
the Office of the Inspector General

1-800-HHS-TIPS

1-800-447-8477

[HHSTips@oig.hhs.gov](mailto:HHSTips@oig.hhs.gov)