

Q: Can I research quality of care in home health agencies in Massachusetts?

A: Yes. The federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) will be publishing shortly "Home Health Compare" information for consumers by phone and on the internet. Massachusetts is one of eight states that will be included in this new service, which will publish information this spring on 11 quality home health measures. This database is similar to a program already available for nursing homes in the Commonwealth.

Home health care is a common Medicare benefit. About 1 in 10 Medicare beneficiaries use home health services, with the average person on Medicare home health receiving 63 home health visits per year. Both Medicare parts A & B cover home health care, including skilled nursing visits, home health aide, physical therapy, speech and occupational therapy, medical equipment like wheelchairs and hospital beds, and other services. Medicaid also covers similar home health services for low-income people.

The 11 indicators that were chosen look at measures related to improved ability to get around the home, improvement in being able to meet basic daily needs, need for emergency medical care, and improved mental health. When you use this new research information, here are the 11 quality measures that will be reported for each home health agency:

1. getting better at walking and moving around using less equipment
2. getting in and out of bed without help
3. getting to and from the toilet without help
4. having less pain when moving around
5. getting better at bathing
6. taking medicines
7. dressing the upper part of the body without help
8. staying the same at bathing without help
9. having to be admitted to the hospital
10. needing emergency medical care
11. being confused less often

"Home Health Compare" will be the first time that this information will be available to the public, to help consumers learn more about an individual home health agency.

The new "Home Health Compare" is expected to work much like the existing "Nursing Home Compare" database. You can call 1-800-MEDICARE, or on the internet: <http://www.medicare.gov>. First you select a state, then a town or zip code, to find home health agencies to research in your area.

Using this database is only one way to research an agency. Before a loved one needs home health care, family members should locate available agencies in their immediate area that provide such care, and call the agencies to ask for

service and cost information. To find out what home health agencies are located in your area, call 1-800-Age-Info, and then press "3".

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