Memory Care Housing | Types, What's Included, and How to Choose the Right Setting

Memory care housing is senior housing designed for people living with Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia, combining a secured environment, specially trained staff, and structured daily routines. It comes in three main forms: dedicated memory care communities, memory care wings inside assisted living communities, and small residential care homes. All three meet the same core needs in different settings, and the right fit depends on how much structure, stimulation, and personal attention your family member needs.

Why Families Are Looking at Memory Care Housing

An estimated 7.4 million Americans aged 65 and older are living with Alzheimer's dementia in 2026, roughly one in nine people in that age group, according to the Alzheimer's Association's 2026 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures report. For most families, the search for housing begins when safety at home becomes a daily worry: a parent who wanders, forgets the stove, or can no longer be left alone for a full day. Memory care housing exists for that moment. It moves the responsibility for supervision, meals, medication, and daily routine from one exhausted family caregiver to a trained team, while giving the resident a setting built around memory loss instead of one that works against it.

Type One: Dedicated Memory Care Communities

A dedicated memory care community serves only residents with memory loss. Every part of the building is designed for that purpose, from secured entrances and enclosed courtyards to hallways that loop back on themselves instead of ending at a locked door. Every staff member, from caregivers to dining and activity teams, is trained to work with dementia. This consistency is the main strength of the model. Programming, mealtimes, and staffing patterns are planned around cognitive decline, and residents are surrounded by peers at a similar stage. The trade-off is scale. Larger campuses can feel busy or stimulating for a person who does better in quiet surroundings, so it is worth asking how many residents share each living area.

Type Two: Memory Care Wings Inside Assisted Living

Many assisted living communities include a secured memory care neighborhood within the same campus. Residents in that wing get dementia-specific supervision and programming, while the rest of the community offers standard assisted living. This setup works especially well for couples in which one spouse needs memory care and the other needs only light assistance, since both can live on the same property and see each other daily. It can also ease a future transition: a resident who starts in assisted living can often move to the memory care wing without leaving the community, familiar faces, or dining room. The questions to ask are how the

wing's staffing differs from the rest of the building and how much time residents spend in shared spaces.

Type Three: Small Residential Care Homes

Small residential care homes are ordinary houses in ordinary neighborhoods that are licensed to care for a handful of seniors, often six or fewer. In California, they are licensed as residential care facilities for the elderly by the California Department of Social Services. Residents share a kitchen, living room, and yard, and caregivers can give each person far more individual attention than a larger building allows. Home-cooked meals and a quiet routine suit people who become anxious in crowded or noisy places. The trade-offs are fewer amenities and fewer scheduled activities. Not every home accepts residents with advanced dementia or those who wander, so families should confirm that the license and staff training cover their loved one's current needs and ask what happens if those needs increase.

What's Included in Memory Care Housing

Memory care housing bundles shelter, supervision, and daily support into one arrangement. A private or shared room is standard, along with housekeeping and laundry. Meals and snacks are provided each day, often with extra help at the table for residents who forget to eat or need cueing. Caregivers assist with bathing, dressing, toileting, and medication management around the clock. Secured doors and alarm systems reduce the risk of wandering, and staff are trained to redirect confusion and agitation without confrontation. Most communities schedule daily programming such as music, reminiscence activities, gentle exercise, and sensory activities designed for people with memory loss.

Pricing is usually built from a base rate plus a level-of-care fee that rises as a resident needs more help, and some items, such as incontinence supplies or medication management, may be billed separately. Because structures differ from one provider to the next, always request a written fee schedule that explains exactly what the base rate covers and what triggers an increase.

How to Choose Memory Care Housing

Choosing memory care housing comes down to matching the setting to the person, not to a brochure. Start with current needs and likely changes: someone who is mostly safe but forgetful has different needs than someone who is exit-seeking or needs two-person help with transfers. Consider temperament next. A social person may thrive in a lively dedicated community, while someone who has always preferred quiet may do better in a small home. Location matters more than families expect, because frequent visits from a spouse, son, or daughter are one of the strongest supports a resident has, so weigh the drive time. If one spouse needs care and the other does not, a community with both assisted living and memory care may keep them together.

Budget and payment sources belong in the decision from the start. Long-term care insurance, veterans benefits, and some state waiver programs can offset costs, but each has its own eligibility rules and paperwork. Once you have narrowed the field, visit in person, and use our guide to touring senior living communities to know what to ask and observe. If you want background on how memory care differs from other levels of care, our overview of memory care covers the basics without repeating them here.

Getting Matched Without Doing It Alone

Sorting through dozens of options while caring for someone with dementia is a heavy load, and you do not have to carry it alone. Placement Helpers is a free senior care placement and advisory service, and you can start with the free care needs assessment to describe your loved one's needs, budget, and preferences. From there, an advisor can help narrow the options to communities and homes that fit the type of memory care housing you are considering, at no cost to your family.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

What is the difference between memory care housing and assisted living?

Assisted living helps residents with daily tasks like bathing, dressing, and medication in a setting where they can generally come and go on their own. Memory care housing adds a secured environment, staff trained in dementia care, and programming designed for people with cognitive decline. Many communities offer both.

Can someone move from assisted living to memory care later?

Yes, and communities that offer both levels of care often make the move easier. A resident who transitions within the same community keeps the same address, many of the same caregivers, and familiar routines, which can reduce the stress of a second move.

Is a small residential care home a good option for memory care?

It can be an excellent fit for people who do best in quiet, home-like settings with more one-on-one attention. Confirm that the home is licensed, that caregivers have dementia training, and what the plan is if your loved one's needs increase.