

Advance Directives

- Your Right to Decide
- Advance Directive Options
- Discussing Your Wishes

Health Care Decisions

Take a look at today's health care, and you'll see one impressive breakthrough after another.



Making smart decisions while you are well helps give you control over your care if you later become incapacitated

Advanced medical procedures, powerful new drugs, and the use of high-tech machines are helping people live longer, healthier lives.

With these developments come many new treatment options. And with more options comes the responsibility for making more complex health care deci-

sions. That's where you, the patient, come in. Whenever possible, it's the patient who now gets to sort through the options and choose the ones that seem best.

Making smart choices – ones that are consistent with your own goals and values – gives you more control. But it also takes some effort on your part. It means:

- Getting the facts, and then deciding for yourself, for as long as you're able

- Deciding who you would like to make decisions for you, if the time ever comes when you can't make them yourself
- Being clear about what types of care you would or would not want, if you were near the end of your life.

Deciding for Yourself

If you're able to decide for yourself, the law puts you in charge of your own care. You have the right to give – or not give – your *informed consent* to care. That just means you have the right to know your options first, then decide for yourself.

Your doctor or other health care provider must help you understand:

- what's wrong with you – your medical condition and outlook
- what course of treatment your doctor is recommending
- what other options there are
- what the risks and benefits are for each of your options.

Advance Directives

Sometimes, people become so sick they can't understand the situation and make their own

decisions. That's when it can help to have a plan figured out ahead of time.

We call a plan like this an *advance directive*. There are two main types:

A **health care appointment** (also called a *durable power of attorney for health care* or *health care proxy*) is the first. It's a document that lets you give someone else – usually a close relative or friend – the power to act on your behalf, if the time comes when you can't speak and act for yourself.

A **health care directive** (also called a *living will* or *health care declaration*) is the second. It's a document that lets you say what kinds of care you would or would not want if you were near the end of your life.

A health care directive often refers to “life-sustaining measures.” These are advanced forms of care that can keep a person alive past the time when death would normally come. For example:

- **CPR (or “cardiopulmonary resuscitation”)** – emergency restarting of a person's heart or breathing
- **a ventilator** – a machine that breathes for a person
- **dialysis** – a machine that does the work of the kidneys
- **tube or “IV” feeding** – for a person who has lost the ability to swallow
- **antibiotics** – to fight an infection that could hasten death.

These two kinds of advance directives can be signed as separate papers. Or they may be combined in a single form. Advance directive options and forms vary from state to state, so be sure to ask your health care provider for information about the choices available in your state.

More Options for Advance Planning

DNR (do not resuscitate) Order – This is a doctor's written order that says, “If this person's breathing or heart stops, do not start CPR.” In some states, this is called a POLST form (which stands for “Physician Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment”). Since methods for documenting DNR instructions vary widely, be sure to discuss your wishes and questions with your doctor.

Organ Donation – This is a person's gift of organs or tissues for transplanting to another person or for research.

Values Statement – This is a statement of your wishes in your own words – an opportunity to discuss not just the “what,” but also the “why” of your advance directives.

Letting Others Know

Studies show that although an advance directive is a valuable way of stating your wishes, it's also important to discuss your views and values with others, especially the person you appoint to act for you, as well as your doctor and your family.

For most people, conversations about possible illness, incapacity, and dying are awkward, at best.

But these conversations have the benefit of making people feel more informed, prepared, and in control. Here are five tips for talking about your advance health care planning:

- **Be a good listener.** But ask the other person to be a good listener, also. And remember, when it comes to your health care, it's your values and goals that count.
- **Give it the time it deserves.** Some

people can say how they feel all at once. For others, it takes time. Go at a pace that's comfortable for you.

- **But don't wait too long.** These topics are almost always easier to handle while we're still healthy and before a crisis hits. Don't put it off.
- **Give your doctor and loved ones current information.** If you've changed
- your views or updated your advance directives, it's time for another conversation.
- **If you find yourself getting stuck, ask for help.** Your priest, minister, rabbi or other spiritual advisor would be a good resource. Or check with a chaplain or social worker at your hospital or other health care provider.

Advance Directives Checklist

- Get the forms approved in your state.
- Read through them carefully and fill them out to reflect your wishes.
- Sign your advance directives in front of the proper witnesses, and have them sign, also. Witness requirements vary, so check this carefully.
- Give copies to the person you appoint as your health care representative and to your doctor and other health care providers. Place the originals where they can be found quickly in an emergency.

My Notes: