

End-of-Life Care: How to Plan for Your Advanced Care



An advance care plan, or advance directive, is a written plan for your medical care. It is only used if you become so sick you cannot make choices for yourself.

A living will and a durable power of attorney are the two main forms of advance directives. A living will says what you want your care to be. A durable power of attorney names someone to make choices about your care when you cannot.

Living will

This legal form tells what treatment you want at the end of your life. For example, it tells when you would or would not want your doctor to use life support. A living will only takes effect if you get very sick and can no longer let other people know what you want.

Durable power of attorney

This legal form lets someone else make medical choices for you if you cannot make them for yourself. This person is called your health care agent or health care proxy. Your health care agent can use your living will, as well as what

he or she knows about your wishes, to make choices about your treatment.

Why should I plan ahead?

It is best to make plans about your health care ahead of time. Even if you are healthy now, an accident or sudden illness could leave you unable to make choices for yourself.

If you can no longer let others know what you want, a written plan can help make sure your health care wishes are followed. With a written plan, your doctor and family members don't have to guess what kind of care you want.

Without a living will and a health care agent, choices about your care may be made by a doctor who does not know you, or by the courts. In some states, hospital staff must take steps to keep you alive as long as possible if your wishes are not known. This means that you could be on life support for a long time even if that is not what you would want.

As long as you can make your wishes known, your advance directive will not be used. You can change or cancel (revoke) it at any time. Having an advance directive can reduce your worries about:

- Your family members having to make hard decisions about your care.
- Costly, unnecessary, or unwanted medical treatments.
- Legal issues.

Create an advance directive

There are four important steps:

1. Get living will and/or durable power of attorney forms for your state.
2. Choose someone to be your health care agent.

3. Fill out the forms and have them notarized or witnessed as your state requires.
4. Make sure your doctor, your family, and your health care agent have copies.

It is best to have your doctor or a lawyer look over the forms to make sure they clearly state your wishes. Laws vary from state to state. Although you can write your own advance directive, you may want to get legal advice.

Keep the original documents in a safe place. Make sure they can easily be found by the person who will be making health care choices for you if you can't make them yourself. Your state may offer an online registry. This is a place you can store your advance directive on the computer. That way, authorized health care providers can find it right away.

Aging With Dignity can help you talk to others about the end of life. This organization offers a form called Five Wishes, which combines a living will and power of attorney into one form. Call 1-888-5WISHES (1-888-594-7437) or go to www.agingwithdignity.org.

CPR and life support options

Often people think of life support only as machines that keep you breathing or keep your heart beating. In addition, life support includes intravenous (IV) medicines to raise blood pressure, feeding tubes or IVs to help you get nutrients or fluids, and kidney dialysis. You will need to decide in advance which of these treatments you want, if any. You also may choose whether you want cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) if your heart stops. Talk to your doctor and family about these options as soon as possible.

If you have a terminal illness, you may choose not to have treatment that might keep you alive artificially. Instead, you may just want treatment to reduce your pain and make you as comfortable as possible at the end of your life. Research has shown that life support machines, CPR, and tubes that give you nutrition or fluids usually do not improve quality of life or extend life for very long. These methods can make you uncomfortable too.

Choosing not to have treatment that might help you live a little longer is a hard decision, but if you are very ill, it may be a good choice. It can save you and family members from suffering unnecessarily. Deciding to quit life support may be more difficult than choosing to not start it at all. You can give a gift to your family by spelling out clearly whether you will want life support, including machines and tubes, and for how long.

Talk about your advance directive

Do not wait for your doctor to bring up the subject of an advance directive. Even if you are healthy right now, think about the kinds of treatments you would or would not want in different situations to help you get a clear idea of your wishes. Also involve your family members so they know what you want.

Be open and direct when you talk about your plans for the end of your life. Your doctors can give you information, answer questions, and advise you. However, the decisions are yours.

You can make many choices about your care ahead of time. Making plans while you are still able can ease your mind and make your final days more peaceful for you and the people you care about.