

## Update: Advance Directives

### ***Decide, Document, and Distribute Your Intentions***

What kind of medical care do you want to receive if you are too injured or ill to express your wishes? A feeding tube? A ventilator? Heroic surgical measures to prolong your life? This is the kind of information that needs to be documented in advance directives.

Advance directives help you convey your medical and end of life care decisions. Without advance directives, medical decisions are left to family members or medical professionals who may or may not support your choices about health care or dying. Your family may disagree with one another on what to do, so make it clear what you want.

**Advance directives** are formal documents regarding your decisions about your future medical care or name someone to make those decisions for you. They are used if you become unable to make your own medical decisions and describe the kind of treatment you would want. If you have a terminal illness or are permanently unconscious, advance directives tell your doctor what kinds of treatment you do or don't want. Advance directives include living wills, durable powers of attorney for health care, and do not resuscitate orders (DNRs).

**Do not resuscitate orders** are guidelines specific to extraordinary life-saving measures – CPR, defibrillation, intubation – and whether you want them used on you. Unless they have a DNR, hospital staff will administer these measures for someone who has stopped breathing or whose heart has stopped. Tell your doctor if you don't want to be resuscitated.

A **living will** is a written, legal document that lets you specify the end-of-life medical care – such as a feeding tube or ventilator – that you want should you become unable to make your own decisions. You can choose to accept or waive medical care.

**Durable power of attorney for health care** is a written, legal document that names a proxy to make medical decisions for you if you are unable to make them for yourself. It can apply at any time, not just at the end of life. You can include specific instructions regarding medical care.

When selecting a health proxy, it is important to select someone who you trust and who knows your care wishes. Name a backup proxy as well, in case the first person is unavailable. Your doctor cannot be your proxy. Usually it is a spouse, family member, close friend, or even attorney.

### **Plan ahead**

Advance directives don't have to be long, complicated legal documents. They can be simple statements about what you want done if you can't speak for yourself. You can simply write your wishes down, use a computer software package or internet-based form, get a form from your doctor or Area Agency on Aging, or work with a lawyer. Laws about advance directives vary by state. Your Area Agency on Aging (see Resources) can help you find out your state laws.

Before drafting your directives, there are conversations you should consider having:

- Talk with your family about your wishes and their willingness to honor them.
- Talk with your physician about what issues you might face and make specific decisions about care choices.
- Talk with your lawyer to help you navigate any laws specific to your state and make sure that your advance directives are legally binding.

Your DNR order or living will should thoroughly explore the options, circumstances, and duration of artificial measures of life support. For instance, your directives may be different if you have a terminal illness than if you are not ill.

### **About My Health Care Manager**

My Health Care Manager helps older adults and their families understand and navigate the health issues and complex decisions associated with aging. For more information, contact My Health Care Manager, 8520 Allison Pointe Blvd., Suite 230, Indianapolis, IN 46250, 317-598-8921 or 800-499-8020 or visit us on the Web at [www.MyHealthCareManager.com](http://www.MyHealthCareManager.com).

We often think of life support in terms of an accident or health trauma, but what if a condition arises from a slowly worsening illness? At what point – if at any point – would you want to cease life support measures? Do you want hospice care? What measures do you want medical staff to use to extend your life? See “Personal Intentions” for more information.

Once you have drafted advance directives, it is a good idea to have them reviewed by your doctor or lawyer. Most states recognize the legality of living wills and durable powers of attorney. Even if they are not legally binding in your state, yours can serve as a guide for your doctors and loved ones.

### Share your decision

Once you have completed your advance directives, they should be signed, dated, witnessed or notarized, copied, and distributed. Give copies to your doctor, health care proxy and family members, including your spouse and children. Ask your physician to make your advance directives part of your permanent medical record. Some hospital emergency rooms allow patients to file documents like advance directives with them.

Carry something that references your advance directives with you in your wallet or purse. You don't have to carry full documents, but a card with the name and contact information of your health care proxy can help ensure emergency health professionals follow your directives.

You can change or revoke advance directives at any time, as long as you are considered of sound mind to do so. Changes must be made according to your state's guidelines for signing, notarizing, etc. Make sure anyone who was aware of or had copies of your advance directives knows that you have changed them.

You can even make changes to your advance directives verbally while in the hospital, and these will be followed instead of the earlier written guidelines. Explain your wishes to your doctor and any family or friends that are with you, and make sure everyone understands your wishes.

Finally, it is important to review your advance directives every two years or when a change in your health occurs.

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## Personal Intentions

Advance directives that simply say “no extreme measures” may not be enough to ensure that you get the level of medical care you desire. Without specifics regarding some of the medical situations you could face, you could spend months or even years on life-support machines.

### Specifics to consider

Do you want any measures taken if you have ...

- Brain damage?
- Terminal illness?
- No discernable capacity to think or speak?

What measures do you want taken to keep you alive?

- CPR?
- Feeding tube or artificial hydration?
- Ventilator?

If you have a specific illness or condition, what care decisions might arise?

- Do you want to be given antibiotics to treat an infection?
- Do you want to undergo dialysis for kidney failure? For how long?
- For a progressively debilitating disease – Parkinson's, ALS, Alzheimer's – to what point do you want treatment?

It is never easy to have conversations about illness or end of life. But it is much more difficult to address these issues in times of duress. Stress, sadness, and family turmoil can often be avoided by having specific, scenario-based advance directives in place.

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## Resources

**AARP's website** contains a wealth of information on advance directives – [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org).

**National Hospice & Palliative Care Organization** offers state-specific advance directives – [www.caringinfo.org/stateaddownload](http://www.caringinfo.org/stateaddownload).

**American Hospital Association's** “Put It In Writing” brochure is available online – [www.putitinwriting.org/putitinwriting\\_app/index.jsp](http://www.putitinwriting.org/putitinwriting_app/index.jsp). The website also includes a notification card you can print off and fill out.

**American Bar Association** has the Consumer's Tool Kit for Health Care Advance Planning -- [www.abanet.org/elderly/toolkit/home.html](http://www.abanet.org/elderly/toolkit/home.html)

**Family Caregiver Alliance** end of life decision section has information on advance directives – [www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content\\_node.jsp?nodeid=434](http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=434).

**American Academy of Family Physicians** offers information and resources on advance directives – [familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/pat-advocacy/endoflife/003.printerview.html](http://familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/pat-advocacy/endoflife/003.printerview.html).

**Area Agencies on Aging** provide free information on state laws concerning advance directives as well as additional community resources – [www.eldercare.gov](http://www.eldercare.gov) or [www.n4a.org](http://www.n4a.org).