

## Advanced Directives

In the event that you should become unable to speak for yourself, advance directives are a general term that refers to your oral and written instructions about your future medical care. Each state regulates the use of advance directives differently, but we will get into this more later.

There are two types of advanced directives: a living will and a medical power of attorney.

A living will is a document in which you are writing your wishes about the medical treatment (s) you would want to have done should you be unable to communicate for yourself at the end of life.

State laws may define when a living will goes into effect, and may limit the treatments to which the living will applies. Different states have different names for these documents; for example, it might be called a directive, a declaration, or a medical directive. Your right to accept or refuse treatment is protected by constitutional and common law as well as state law.

A medical power of attorney is a document that lets you appoint someone you trust to make decisions about your medical care if you cannot make those decisions yourself. This type of advanced directive may also be called a health care proxy, appointment of a health care agent or a durable power of attorney for health care.

The person that you appoint through a medical power of attorney normally is authorized to speak for you anytime you are unable to make your own medical decisions, not only at the end of life.

Advanced directives, in general, give you a voice in decisions about your medical care when you are unconscious or too ill to communicate. As long as you are able to express your own decisions, your advanced directives will not be used and you can continue to accept or refuse any medical treatment (s) as you normally would.

But if you become seriously ill, you may lose the ability to participate in decisions about your own treatment. The agent you choose to act in your stead should be a person whom you trust, who knows your wishes about medical treatment and who is willing to take responsibility to ensure your wishes are followed.

Because you are asking this person to accept a significant responsibility, realize that not everyone is willing to act as an agent. Understand this, so you can be okay with someone's inability to accept your request. Reconsider your choice, then choose someone who can perform as you need. Appointing an agent or accepting such an appointment can raise questions you might never have considered. You may reach a deepened understanding of yourself and your relationship of yourself and your relationship with the person you appoint or who appoints you. Taking time to talk about these issues can be a rewarding experience.

Talk to your agent about your wishes regarding end-of-life medical treatment. Even family members may not know how much treatment a loved one would be willing to accept near the end of life. Discussion clarifies what you want and diminishes an agent's potential guilt and anguish over whether or not he or she is doing the "right" thing.

Next, prepare and sign the appropriate forms for your state. Keep the original and give the copies to your agent and alternate agents, family and doctors and have it placed in your medical record at the hospital. This is a very important step. Everyone involved needs a copy.

There are numerous benefits to having an agent who knows and understands how you feel. He or she can make decisions in situations you might not have anticipated. Your agent will also have some flexibility. He or she can talk with your physicians about your changing medical condition and authorize treatment or have it withdrawn

as circumstances change. If you have prepared a living will, your agent can interpret it in situations that were not foreseen.

Be sure to make clear in your living will that your agent should make decisions on how to interpret it or when to apply it. Your agent can be an advocate for you. In most states, your agent can make decisions anytime you lose the ability to make a medical decision (such as when you are in a coma), not just decisions about the end of life.

One decision that may come up is life support. Life support replaces or supports a failing bodily function. When patients have curable or treatable conditions, life support is used temporarily until the illness or disease can be stabilized and the body can resume a normal functioning. At times, the body may never regain the ability to function without life support.

When making decisions about specific forms of life support, gather the facts you need to make an informed decision. In particular, understand the benefits as well as the burden the treatment will offer you or your loved one. A treatment may be beneficial if it relieves suffering, restores functioning or enhances the quality of life. The same treatment can be burdensome if it causes pain, prolongs the dying process without offering benefit or adds to the perception of a diminished quality of life.

Advanced directives are not just for the elderly. A serious accident could happen to anyone, so every adult over the age of 18 should prepare one. You need to consider talking to your adult children about the need for an advanced directive. They should have a voice in their care and you should know what they're wishes are in the event of an unforeseen accident or illness. This is an important conversation to have.