

## Advance Directives

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It can be hard for doctors and loved ones to know what kind of treatment you would want when you are too sick to tell them. A special document called an "advance directive" communicates wishes and preferences for care when people are too sick to speak or make decisions for themselves. It is important to understand that an advance directive is not the same thing as a will. The best way to make sure your wishes are respected is to discuss them with your health care provider and your loved ones while you're healthy and then fill out an advance directive form. Once completed, copies should be given to your health care provider and to those closest to you, so they can help carry out your wishes, if necessary.

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### Q . **How can I get an advance directive form?**

A . Your doctor may be able to give an advance directive form. Forms vary from state to state, so be sure to use the form approved by your state. You or your doctor can get a copy of your state's form from Partnership for Caring's (formerly Choice in Dying) web site ([www.partnershipforcaring.org](http://www.partnershipforcaring.org)) or by calling them at 1-800-989-9455. The Eldercare Locator [(800) 677-1116] can also direct you to organizations and sites that can provide a copy of the advance directive form used by your state.

### Q . **What can an advance directive form help me do?**

A . Advance directive forms allow you to:

- Express your wishes regarding particular kinds of medical treatments that you may be offered when seriously ill; or
- Name a person whom you want to make health care decisions for you when you are unable to do so. This person is called a health care surrogate or a durable power of attorney for health care. If necessary, he or she makes health care decisions that you would make for yourself if you were able to do so; or
- Do a combination of the above.

Even if you do not fill out or do not wish to complete an advance directive form, you should speak with your health care provider and your family about your wishes.

### Q . **What should I remember as I choose a healthcare surrogate?**

A . It is important to choose someone who understands your values and wishes for health care treatment. After all, he or she is being asked to make decisions for you if you cannot make them for yourself. You will want to choose someone who will make the choices that you would make for yourself, even if those are not the choices that he or she would make in the same situation.

**Q . Can I wait until I am admitted to a hospital before completing an advance directive?**

**A .** Yes. Advance directive forms are available at hospitals across the country. However, waiting until you are hospitalized is not a good idea. A sudden illness, such as a stroke, may make you too ill to complete an advance directive—just when it is most important.

**Q . What else should I keep in mind as I complete an advance directive?**

**A .** You should not complete an advance directive until you know what you want it to say. Once you have made your decisions about future care, fill out the form as soon as you can, so that it will be available whenever it is needed.

**Q . Do I need a lawyer to complete an advance directive?**

**A .** You may want to see a lawyer if:

- You live in more than one state during the course of the year; or
- You don't fully understand the standard advance directive form, or you find that it does not allow you to express your actual health care preferences; or
- You have concerns that the advance directive form does not address.

A lawyer can help you with those parts of end-of-life planning not covered by an advance directive.

**Q . What if I need to change my advance directive?**

**A .** Your advance directive may be consulted long after it was first written. You should review the document regularly to make sure it communicates your current health care wishes. For example, if you have named a health care surrogate, be sure that individual is still willing and able to perform the task. Perhaps another individual (such as one of your grown children) is now a better choice to take on this responsibility. Only you can know for certain whether your advance directive still accurately reflects your wishes.

If you change your mind about your health care preferences, be sure to notify your doctors, caregivers, and anyone else named in prior advanced directives in writing. It is important that these individuals understand your current wishes and their role in executing them. Those who are responsible for carrying out your health care wishes need to have the most up-to-date copy of your advance directive.

**Q . Should I provide information about my specific wishes in different situations on the advance directive form?**

**A .** Advance directives in their standard form are vague, stating only that you would not want "heroic" or "artificial" treatment if you are clearly "dying." It is best to provide as much specific information as possible. Thinking about and discussing different situations and what you would like to happen in them is helpful.



For example, if you do not want your heart restarted (artificial resuscitation) or you do not want to go on a breathing machine (ventilator), include this on the form. Many people would be willing to try aggressive and uncomfortable treatment for a while, but then would want it to be stopped if their condition does not improve. Making these wishes clear often requires working with your physician to make statements about how you want to be treated, including when health care providers should stop. As difficult as this can be, it is exactly the kind of advice that will help your family and caregivers most.

**Q . What can I do if the advance directive still doesn't express all I want to say?**

**A .** Many people find it useful to add their own thoughts to a formal advance directive. You can write a letter to the person who serves as your health care surrogate and attach it to the advance directive. In this letter, you can reflect upon serious illness with people you have known or known about and what matters most in your life. This will help you guide your health care surrogate in making your wishes known to doctors.

**Q . Where do I go for more information?**

**A .** The Foundation for Health in Aging  
Eldercare at Home  
Chapter 27, "Advance Directives"  
[www.healthinaging.org/eldercare/chap27.html](http://www.healthinaging.org/eldercare/chap27.html)  
(212) 755-6810

American Medical Association  
[www.ama-assn.org/public/booklets/livgwill.htm](http://www.ama-assn.org/public/booklets/livgwill.htm)

Legal Services for the Elderly  
[www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/dir/118.html](http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/dir/118.html)  
(212) 391-0120

Partnership for Caring  
[www.partnershipforcaring.org](http://www.partnershipforcaring.org)  
(800) 989-9455

