

Advance Directives: What you should know

What is an advance directive? Advance directives are documents signed by a competent person giving direction to health care providers about treatment choices in certain circumstances. There are two types of advance directives. A durable power of attorney for health care ("durable power") allows you to name a "patient advocate" to act for you and carry out your wishes. A living will allows you to state your wishes in writing, but does not name a patient advocate.

Why have an advance directive? Many people have strong feelings about the kind of medical care they would like to receive or refuse in certain circumstances. An advance directive allows you to clearly state your feelings.

What decisions should I consider?

- Who would you like to make treatment decisions for you, if you become unable to so?
- How do you feel about ventilators, surgery, resuscitation (CPR), drugs or tube feeding if you were to become terminally ill? If you were unconscious and not likely to wake up? If you were senile?
- What kind of medical treatment would you want if you had a severe stroke or other medical condition that made you dependant on others for all your care?
- What sort of mental, physical, or social abilities are important for you to enjoy living?
- Do you want to receive every treatment your care-givers recommend?

What is a Durable Power of Attorney for health care? It is a legal document that allows you to name anyone at least eighteen years old to be your advocate and make health care decisions for you. You can pick a family member, friend or any other person you trust, but be sure the person you choose is willing to serve. A durable power can be used to accept or refuse any treatment. If you want your patient advocate to be able to refuse any treatment and let you die, you must say so specifically in the durable power document. A durable power goes into effect only when you are not able to make decisions for yourself.

Must I have a Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care? No. You have this option, but no one can require you to have a durable power. You can make your wishes known by talking with your family or doctor or by writing them down, but unless you have a durable power, a patient advocate does not have legal authority to act for you.

Must I give written instructions about my treatment? No. You can simply name a patient advocate. But, remember that your advocate can only have life-sustaining care stopped if you say so in your durable power. It is probably better to have written instructions because then everyone can read them and understand your wishes. If you do not want to name an advocate, you can write a "living will" stating your choices. Or, you can simply make sure your family and care-givers know what you want if you were to get sick. It is important for hospitals to understand your wishes. Writing them down makes it clear what you want.

Must I make decisions now about my future medical treatment? No. You do not have to have a durable power or living will and you do not have to tell anyone your wishes. You can still make treatment choices while you are competent. If you are no longer competent, but you have made sure your family and care-givers know what you would want, it will be easier to follow your wishes. If you have not made your wishes known to family and care-givers, a court may have to name a guardian to make decisions for you.

What should I do if I want an advance directive? You can obtain an advance directive online via uslivingwillregistry.com or request one from your doctor or hospital admissions office.

How to get started:

1. Pick a healthcare agent. Often times the agent is a spouse, sibling, or an adult child; the key is to pick someone who knows you well and will be able to do what you would wish if you become incapacitated, even if it's different from what he or she would choose. Experts recommend naming just one person and perhaps an alternate.

2. Complete the Advance Directive (living will). This document may be as open ended or as specific as you wish. You'll need to consider under what conditions you'd want to be kept alive through artificial respiration, and you should also address whether you'd want food and hydration through artificial means. This is also the vehicle to discuss organ donation and burial instructions.

3. Tell your healthcare agent, doctor, and other family members what you want. There's no substitute for conversation to clarify your wishes.

4. Keep the original document at home, and give copies to your healthcare agent and your doctor. Your hospital admission office can download your advance directive into your medical record file, so it can be easily accessed.