

YOUR RIGHT TO DECIDE

Advance Directives Information Sheet

What You Should Know About Advance Directives

Everyone has the right to make personal decisions about health care. Doctors ask whether you will accept a treatment by discussing the risks and benefits and working with you to decide. But what if you can no longer make your own decisions? Anyone can wind up hurt or sick and unable to make decisions about medical treatments. An advance directive speaks for you if you are unable to and helps make sure your religious and personal beliefs will be respected. It is a useful legal document for an adult of any age to plan for future health care needs. While no one is required to have an advance directive, it is smart to think ahead and make a plan now. If you don't have an advance directive and later you can't speak for yourself, then usually your next of kin will make health care decisions for you. But even if you want your next of kin to make decisions for you, an advance directive can make things easier for your loved ones by helping to prevent misunderstandings or arguments about your care.

What can you do in an advance directive?

An advance directive allows you to decide who you want to make health care decisions for you if you are unable to do so yourself. You can also use it to say what kinds of treatments you do or do not want, especially the treatments often used in a medical emergency or near the end of a person's life.

Health Care Agent

Someone you name to make decisions about your health care is called a "health care agent" (sometimes also called a "durable power of attorney for health care," but, unlike other powers of attorney, this is not about money). You can name a family member or someone else. This person has the authority to see that doctors and other health care providers give you the type of care you want, and that they do not give you treatment against your wishes. Pick someone you trust to make these kinds of serious decisions and talk to this person, to make sure he or she understands and is willing to accept this responsibility.

Health Care Instructions

You can let providers know what treatments you want to have or not to have. (Sometimes this is called a "living will," but it has nothing to do with an ordinary will about property.)

Examples of the types of treatment you might decide about are:

- a. Life support – such as breathing with a ventilator
- b. Efforts to revive a stopped heart or breathing (CPR)
- c. Feeding through tubes inserted into the body
- d. Medicine for pain relief

Ask your doctor for more information about these treatments. Think about how, if you become badly injured or seriously ill, treatments like these fit in with your goals, beliefs, and values.

How do you prepare an advance directive?

Begin by talking things over, if you want, with family members, close friends, your doctor, or a religious advisor. Many people go to a lawyer to have an advance directive prepared. You can also get sample forms yourself from many places, including the ones given as examples and the end of this information sheet. There is no one form that must be used. You can even make up your own advance directive document. To make your advance directive valid, it must be signed by you in the presence of two witnesses, who also will sign. If you name a health care agent, make sure that person is not a witness. You should give a copy of your advance directive to your doctor, who will keep it in your medical file, and to others you trust to have it available when needed. Copies are just as valid as the originals. You can also make a valid advance directive by talking to your doctor in front of a witness.

When would your advance directive take effect?

Usually, your advance directive would take effect when your doctor certifies in writing that you are not capable of making a decision about your care. If your advance directive contains health care instructions, they will take effect depending on your medical condition at the time. If you name a health care agent, you should make clear in the advance directive when you want the agent to be able to make decisions for you.

Can you change your advance directive?

Yes, you can change or take back your advance directive at anytime. The most recent one will count.

Where can you get forms and more information about advance directives?

There are many places to get forms, including medical, religious, aging assistance, and legal organizations. Two examples are listed below:

Call Caring Connections (NHPCO)

1-800-658-8898

<http://www.caringinfo.org>

You can download a copy of the Virginia Advance Medical Directive from the following site:

<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/OLC/documents/2008/pdfs/2005%20advanced%20directive%20form.pdf>