

Advance Directives

A health care Advance Directive, also called "Medical Power of Attorney," gives instructions for health care in the event that, in the future, someone is not able to make these decisions. The advance directive names an "agent" for making health care decisions in the event of an incapacitating illness or injury, and it also details the kind of health care the person does not want to receive.

Why Is an Advance Directive Needed?

If you don't have an Advance Directive and you become incapacitated, a court may have to name someone to make medical decisions on your behalf. This process can be long and complicated. It also may create undue stress on your family in a time of crisis, especially if family members disagree as to what course of treatment is best, or what course of treatment you would have wanted. With an Advance Directive, you can name in advance who you want to make decisions for you, and your family, and the court will not have to guess about your wishes.

Moreover, you can also specify exactly what kind of health care you wish to receive. Without an Advance Directive, health care providers or others will make decisions about your health care that you may not have wanted. Advances in medical science allow doctors to keep patients alive much longer than they once could; sometimes prolonging life in this way is hopeful, but other times it means that people are kept alive when they are no longer able to live a fulfilling and conscious life. If there is an Advance Directive, patients decide what kind of health care they receive, and how long they want to receive it.

Go over a copy of your Advance Directive with your physician, your family and the person you name as your agent.



Decisions to Make

As you make up your Advance Directive, you will need to evaluate your wishes, concerns and fears so that you can make rational choices about what to include in your specifications. Here are some of the things you will need to consider:

- What kind of medical treatment do I want to receive?
- Do I want to receive life-sustaining treatment?
- If so, under what conditions?
- Who do I want to be my agent?
- Should my instructions be specific or general?

How to Make an Advance Directive

Different states have different laws about medical directives. Typically, there is a special form to fill out, and most states require two witnesses when you sign this form. In some cases, it will also need to be notarized. Give close family members a copy of your Advance Directive, including the person you name as an agent, your physician and any other people who may be affected by the Advance Directive.

As long as you are able, you can at any time change your specifications in your Advance Directive; you must simply destroy old copies and follow the proper procedures for preparing a new one. If you do make changes, make sure that you replace everyone's copy of the old one with the new one.