
Understanding Advance Care Planning

Advance care planning is the process of deciding your own future medical care. It helps assure that if you can't speak for yourself, your wishes can still be carried out. The plan is a series of legal documents. These note your wishes. The documents vary by state. They can help you and your family be prepared in case of a major illness or injury. They help with making decisions at these times.

Advance care planning should be:

- Discussed at a regular visit with your primary care provider
- Done if you have a serious illness that's expected to get worse
- Done before major surgery



Who will speak for you?

A healthcare proxy is a person who acts as your voice when you can't speak for yourself. The name of this role varies by state. It may be called a Durable Medical Power of Attorney or Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare. It may be called an agent, surrogate, or advocate. Or it may be called a representative or decision maker. It's an official duty that is noted in a legal document. The document varies by state.

Why is advance care planning important?

When you write down your healthcare wishes:

- You will be given medical care that matches your values and goals.
- Your family won't be forced to make decisions in a crisis with no help.

Creating a plan

Making an advance care plan is often done in 3 steps:

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- **Thinking about your wishes.** Think about what kind of medical treatment you would want if you lost the ability to communicate. Are there any situations in which you would refuse or stop treatment? Are there therapies you would want or not want? And whom do you want to make decisions for you? There are many places to learn more about how to plan for your care. Ask your healthcare provider or legal adviser for resources.
 - **Picking a healthcare proxy.** This means choosing a trusted person to speak for you only when you can't speak for yourself. When you can't make medical decisions, your proxy makes sure your advance care plan is followed. A proxy doesn't make decisions based on their own opinions. They put aside their opinions and carry out your wishes.
 - **Filling out the legal documents.** There are several kinds of legal documents to fill out. They may vary by state. Each one tells healthcare providers your wishes. They must be signed by you. They may need to be witnessed or notarized. You can cancel or change them whenever you wish. The documents may include a Healthcare Proxy form, Living Will, Durable Medical Power of Attorney, and Advance Directive.

The family's role

The best help a family can give is to support their loved one's wishes. Open and honest discussion is vital. Family should talk about any concerns they have about their loved one's choices. This should be done while the person can still make decisions.