

Advance Directives

People make plans all the time for all sorts of things-- vacation, work, weekends. Plans can be guides to getting what you want. Some things you don't plan for, like a serious illness or an accident. But illness and accidents can happen.

An advance directive is a type of plan that lets everyone-- from your care provider to your family-- know how you want to be treated when you need medical care and aren't able to choose for yourself.

"When Dad was in the hospital for the last few months of his life, it was so hard. Not only because we were grieving...We didn't know what Dad wanted for his medical care at the end. We'd never talked about it."

The two types of advance directives are a living will and a durable power of attorney for health care. A living will is a document that covers how you want to be treated at the end of your life.

"Right after we got married, my wife and I each prepared our advance directives. My wife insisted on it. Even though it feels like we have a lifetime ahead of us, it's reassuring to know that if anything happens, we'll have a guide to help us make end-of-life medical decisions when we're scared or worried. It's just another way we're planning to take care of each other."

"Aunt Carol's living will let us know that she wanted to be kept comfortable. And that she didn't want to be put on life support. So when the time came, Aunt Carol could spend her last days at home."

The durable power of attorney for health care is a way to choose someone to make medical decisions for you when you can't make them for yourself.

"I live several states over, so I am not able to get home in time to help with urgent medical decisions. Our family talked about it, and we all agreed that it was a good idea for my mom to give my sister her health care power of attorney. She keeps me in the loop with all the decisions but she is right there when the doctors need to know Mom's preferences at critical moments in her care."

So how do you prepare your advance directives? Try to talk about your preferences with the people in your life who are important to you. But it's also very important to talk about what you want with the person you plan to name as your health care power of attorney. Your care provider can help you get the right advance directive forms for your state.

Complete the forms and have them witnessed or notarized as your state requires. Make sure your care providers and your family have copies. And just so you know, it's never too soon and you're never too healthy to prepare your advance directives.

It can be hard to think about things like the end of your life or the life of someone you love. But it may help to think of advance directives as a gift you give to the people who care for you.

When you put your wishes in writing, they'll know that you're getting the care that you want and that is right for you.