

ADVANCE DIRECTIVES

What are advance directives?

An advance directive is a written document you prepare stating how you want medical decisions made if you lose the ability to make decisions for yourself. The value of an advance directive is that it allows you to state your choices for health care or to name someone to make those choices for you if you become unable to make decisions about your medical treatment. An advance directive ensures your right to accept or refuse medical care. You can say "yes" to treatment you want, or "no" to treatment you don't want.

Why is there so much interest in Advance Directives?

Questions about medical care at the end of life are of great concern today, partly because of the growing ability of medical technology to prolong life and partly because of highly publicized legal cases involving comatose patients whose families wanted to withdraw treatment. Many people want to avoid extending personal and family suffering by artificial prolongation of life if they are in a vegetative state or when there is no hope for recovery. The best way for you to retain control in such a situation is to record your preferences for medical care in advance and share your decisions with your physician and loved ones.

What does the law say about this issue?

Laws differ somewhat from state to state, but in general a patient's expressed wishes will be honored. No law or court has invalidated the concept of advance directives and an increasing number of statutes and court decisions support it. In 1990, the Supreme Court found in the case of Nancy Cruzan that the state of Missouri could require "clear and convincing" evidence of a patient's wishes in order to remove life supports. Formal advance directives can be critical to establishing such "clear and convincing" evidence of a patient's wishes. The Patient Self-Determination Act of 1990 requires hospitals to inform their patients about advance directives.

What is a living will?

A living will is a document in which you can stipulate the kind of life-prolonging medical care you want if you become terminally ill, permanently unconscious, or in a vegetative state and unable to make your own decisions. Many states have their own living-will forms, each with somewhat different requirements. It is also possible to complete and sign a standard form from a stationery store, draw up your own form, or simply write a statement of your preferences for treatment, as long as you follow the state's witnessing requirements.

A living will should be signed, dated, and witnessed by two people, preferably individuals who know you well but are not related to you and are not your potential heirs or your health care providers. A number of states require a notary or permit a notary in lieu of two witnesses. The living will should be discussed and shared with your physician, family and clergy, and you should ask your physician to make it a part of your permanent medical record.

Verify that the living will is indeed in your medical record, including your hospital chart. Although you do not need a lawyer to draw up a living will, you may wish to discuss it with a lawyer and leave a copy with the family lawyer.

What is a Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care?

A durable power of attorney for health care is another kind of advance directive: a signed, dated, and witnessed document naming another person to make medical decisions for you if you are unable to make them for yourself at any time, not just at the end of life. You can include instructions about any treatment you want or wish to avoid, such as surgery or artificial nutrition and hydration. The majority of states have specific laws allowing a health care power of attorney, and provide suggested forms. You can draw up a durable power of attorney for health care with or without the advice of a lawyer; however most states do not allow the appointed agent to act as a witness.

Which is Better: a Living Will or a Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care?

Historically, living wills were developed first, and health care powers of attorney were designed later to be more flexible and apply to more situations. Today the distinction between the two types of documents is becoming blurred. It is possible to have both a living will and a durable power of attorney for health care. Some states combine them in a single document that both describes one's treatment preferences in a variety of situations and names a proxy.

How can I know in advance which procedures I would want or not want to prolong my life?

Although it isn't possible to specify every possible procedure under every possible circumstance, it is possible to decide what kind of treatment you would want in most situations. There are certain common conditions (terminal, irreversible brain damage and dementing illnesses) and treatments commonly used in end-of-life situations (CPR, ventilators, artificial nutrition and hydration, dialysis and antibiotics) that can be discussed in advance. Preferences can be clarified by thinking about and discussing with your family, friends and others your views about death, being totally dependent on the care of others, the role of family finances, the conditions that would make life intolerable to you, and how artificial life-support would affect the dying process. If you have questions about the kinds of procedures that are often used when illness is severe and recovery unlikely, ask your physician.

It is never too early to start this decision-making process, and you should not postpone it until you face serious illness. Patients need to play an active role in determining their own health care decisions.

What is the legal status of advance directives?

All states legally recognize some form of advance medical directive. Even if a particular instruction in an advance directive might not be enforceable under some circumstances, it is better to express your wishes and intent in some kind of written document than not to express them at all.

Can an Advance Directive be canceled or changed?

You may change or revoke these documents at any time. Any alterations and any written revocation should be signed and dated, and copies should be given to your family, physician, and other appropriate people. (For substantial changes, a new living will should be written and witnessed.) Even without an official written change, your orally expressed direction to your physician has priority over any statement made in a living will or power of attorney as long as you are able to decide for yourself and can communicate your wishes.

If you wish to revoke an advance directive at any time, you should notify your primary physician, family and others who might need to know. If you consulted an attorney in drawing up your document, you should also notify him or her.

What if I fill out an advance directive in one state and I am hospitalized in a different state?

The majority of states have reciprocity provisions. Even in those states that do not explicitly address the issue, there is a common law and constitutional right to accept or refuse treatment that may be broader than the rights identified under the state law. Because an advance directive is an expression of your intent regarding your medical care, it will influence that care no matter where you are hospitalized. However, if you spend a great deal of time in more than one state you might wish to consider executing an advance directive in those states.

Points to Remember

Make sure that someone, such as family member or your lawyer, knows that you have an advance directive and knows where it is located. You might also consider the following:

- If you have a durable power of attorney, give a copy to your agent or proxy.
- Give your physician a copy of your advance directive to be part of your permanent medical record.
- Keep a copy of your advance directive in a safe place where it can be found easily if it is needed.

- Keep a small card in your purse or wallet stating that you have an advance directive, where it is located and who your agent or proxy is, if you have named one.

If you need help in preparing an advance directive, or if you would like more information, you may want to contact a lawyer, a nearby hospital, hospice or long-term care facility, or your state attorney general's office.

Websites:

- To download Missouri Advance Directive forms, visit Life Choices provided by the Missouri Attorney General's Office at <http://www.ago.mo.gov/publications/lifechoices/lifechoices.htm>
- To download state specific Advance Directives, visit The National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization at <http://www.caringinfo.org>

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