



Role of the advance health care directive

Also known as a living will, personal directive, advance directive or advance decision.

Planning ahead for future health care decisions is an important step for you, your family and/or loved ones. In the event of a major health event, where you may be unable to communicate, an advance health care directive provides medical instructions that reflect your personal values and wishes. Certain medical conditions may be considered by many to be worse than death, and we all have the right to carefully consider what we would want our family, loved ones or close friends to do should we be in a situation where we required life support or life-extending intervention. To what extent would you want “extreme measures” taken on your behalf? These decisions can be very emotional, and being able to talk about and work through all of the implications ahead of time can be a tremendous benefit to you and to everyone involved.

Advance health care directive

An advance health care directive is a document for making health care decisions in the event you become unable to make those decisions. There are two types of advance health care directives:

- 1 A living will which spells out what types of medical treatment a person wants if unable to speak for themselves; and
- 2 A health care power of attorney, which appoints someone to make health care decisions on the person’s behalf.¹

Living will

A living will is a document that clarifies your wishes and provides medical instructions for your loved ones. The living will addresses topics such as whether or not life support measures should be taken to keep you alive under certain circumstances. The living will may include specific instructions about some of the following end of life considerations:

- Feeding tube or artificial nutrition
- Ventilator
- Intubation (i.e., tubes to add or remove fluids)
- Pain medication
- Organ donation
- Do Not Resuscitate order
- Special instructions for your care

Selecting a health care power of attorney or health care agent

It is important that the health care power of attorney or health care agent be very familiar with your wishes. Many people choose a spouse, partner or close family member — someone they know well and who would be willing to carry out the directions you have given regardless of personal feelings or influence from other family and friends. You should be sure to name an alternate agent to stand in if the primary agent is not available.¹

¹ “Advance Directives: Creating a Living Will and Health Care Power of Attorney,” AARP, Legal and Financial Matters, November 2010. www.aarp.org/relationships/caregiving-resource-center/info-11-2010/lfm_living_will_and_health_care_power_of_attorney.html.

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Health care power of attorney

A health care power of attorney is a surrogate appointed to make health care decisions on one's behalf if one is not able to communicate on their own. The health care agent may also be called an attorney-in-fact or proxy. This health care power of attorney assignment is also called a health care proxy, appointment of a health care agent, or durable power of attorney for health care. In some states, the living will and health care power of attorney are combined into a single document called the advance health care directive.

Notifying your family and health care providers

Your family and/or loved ones should know where you stand on your advanced directives. Having a dialogue with them can begin with a family meeting and can be clarified through ongoing conversations that parallel the health experiences of friends and other family members.

Many hospitals are set up to follow the verbal instructions of their patients. How can you be sure your health care providers are attuned to your wishes when you encounter a medical moment of truth and are unable to communicate with them?

The U.S. Living Will Registry is a nationwide service that stores your advance health care directive electronically and makes it available 24 hours a day to health care providers across the country. The Registry has been a central storage place since 1996 for individual advance health care directives — living wills, health care proxies, or both — providing medical professionals with access to individuals' living wills at the hour it is most important. For more information: <http://uslwr.com/formslist.shtm>

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