

ADVANCE DIRECTIVES

WHAT IS AN ADVANCE DIRECTIVE?

An advance directive tells your doctor what kind of care you would like to have if you become unable to make medical decisions (if you are in a coma, for example). If you are admitted to the hospital, the hospital staff will probably talk to you about advance directives. Laws about advance directives are different in each state.

A good advance directive describes the kind of treatment you would want depending on how sick you are. For example, the directives would describe what kind of care you want if you have an illness that you are unlikely to recover from, or if you are permanently unconscious. Advance directives tell your doctor that you don't want certain kinds of treatment or that you want a certain treatment no matter how ill you are.

WHAT IS A LIVING WILL?

A living will is one type of advance directive. It is a written, legal document that describes the kind of medical treatments or life-sustaining treatments you would want if you were seriously or terminally ill. A living will doesn't let you select someone to make decisions for you.

WHAT IS A DO NOT RESUSCITATE ORDER?

A do not resuscitate (DNR) order is another kind of advance directive. A DNR is a request not to have cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) if your heart stops or if you stop breathing. Unless given other instructions, hospital staff will try to help any patient whose heart has stopped or who has stopped breathing. You can use an advance directive form or tell your doctor that you don't want to be resuscitated. Your doctor will put the DNR order in your medical chart. Doctors and hospitals in all states accept DNR orders.

SHOULD I HAVE AN ADVANCE DIRECTIVE?

By creating an advance directive, you are making your preferences about medical care known before you're faced with a serious injury or illness. This will spare your loved ones the stress of making decisions about your care while you are sick. Any person 18 years of age or older can prepare an advance directive.

People who are seriously or terminally ill are more likely to have an advance directive. However, even if you are in good health, you might want to consider writing an advance directive. An accident or serious illness can happen suddenly, and if you already have a signed advance directive, your wishes are more likely to be followed.

HOW CAN I WRITE AN ADVANCE DIRECTIVE?

You can write an advance directive in several ways:

- + Use a form provided by your doctor.
- + Write your wishes down by yourself.
- + Call your health department or state department on aging to get a form.
- + Call a lawyer.
- + Use a computer software package for legal documents.

WHAT IS A DURABLE POWER OF ATTORNEY FOR HEALTH CARE?



A durable power of attorney (DPA) for health care is another kind of advance directive. A DPA states whom you have chosen to make health care decisions for you. It becomes active any time you are unconscious or unable to make medical decisions. A DPA is generally more useful than a living will. But a DPA may not be a good choice if you don't have another person you trust to make these decisions for you.

Living wills and DPAs are legal in most states. Even if these advance directives aren't officially recognized by the law in your state, they can still guide your loved ones and doctor if you are unable to make decisions about your medical care. Ask your doctor, lawyer or state representative about the law in your state.

REFERENCES

All information sourced from the National Institutes of Health's National Institute on Aging and FamilyDoctor.org, a resource operated by the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP)