



Living wills and advance directives for medical decisions

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Living wills and other advance directives describe your preferences regarding end-of-life care. Because unexpected situations can happen at any age, all adults need advance directives.

Living wills and other advance directives describe your preferences regarding treatment if you're faced with a serious accident or illness. These legal documents speak for you when you're not able to speak for yourself — for instance, if you're in a coma.

Living wills and other advance directives aren't just for older adults. Unexpected end-of-life situations can happen at any age, so it's important for all adults to have advance directives.

Advance directives: More than just living wills

Advance directives are written instructions regarding your medical care preferences. Your family and doctors will consult your advance directives if you're unable to make your own health care decisions. Having written instructions can help reduce confusion or disagreement.

Advance directives include:

- **Living will.** This written, legal document spells out the types of medical treatments and life-sustaining measures you want and don't want, such as mechanical breathing (respiration and ventilation), tube feeding or resuscitation. In some states, living wills may be called health care declarations or health care directives.
- **Medical or health care power of attorney (POA).** The medical POA is a legal document that designates an individual — referred to as your health care agent or proxy — to make medical decisions for you in the event that you're unable to do so. However, it is different from a power of attorney authorizing someone to make financial transactions for you.
- **Do not resuscitate (DNR) order.** This is a request to not have cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) if your heart stops or if you stop breathing. Advance directives do not have to include a DNR order, and you don't have to have an advance directive to have a DNR order. Your doctor can put a DNR order in your medical chart.

Do you need a living will and a medical POA?

A living will can't cover every possible situation. Therefore, you might also want a medical POA to designate someone to be your health care agent. This person will be guided by your living will but has the authority to interpret your wishes in situations that aren't described in your living will. A medical POA also might be a good idea if your family is opposed to some of your wishes or is divided about them.

Choosing a health care agent

Choosing a person to act as your health care agent is possibly the most important part of your planning. You need to trust that this person has your interests at heart, understands your wishes and will act accordingly. He or she should also be mature and levelheaded, and comfortable with candid conversations. Don't pick someone out of feelings of guilt or obligation.

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Your health care agent doesn't necessarily have to be a family member. You may want your health care decision maker to be different from the person you choose to handle your financial matters. It may be helpful, but it's not necessary, if the person lives in the same city or state as you do.

What treatments would you want?

In determining your wishes, think about your values, such as the importance to you of being independent and self-sufficient, and what you feel would make your life not worth living. Would you want treatment to extend life in any situation? Would you want treatment only if a cure is possible? Would you want palliative care to ease pain and discomfort if you were terminally ill?

Although you can't predict what medical situations will arise, be sure to discuss the following treatments. It may help to talk with your doctor about these, especially if you have questions.

- **Resuscitation.** Restarts the heart when it has stopped beating (cardiac death). Determine if and when you would want to be resuscitated by cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) or by a device that delivers an electric shock to stimulate the heart.
- **Mechanical ventilation.** Takes over your breathing if you're unable to do so. Consider if, when and for how long you would want to be placed on a mechanical ventilator.
- **Nutritional and hydration assistance.** Supplies the body with nutrients and fluids intravenously or via a tube in the stomach. Decide if, when and for how long you would want to be fed in this manner.
- **Dialysis.** Removes waste from your blood and manages fluid levels if your kidneys no longer function. Determine if, when and for how long you would want to receive this treatment.

Organ donation

You can also specify in your advance directives any wishes you have about donating your organs, eyes and tissues for transplantation or your body for scientific study. If you wish to donate your body for scientific study, contact the medical school closest to your home for details.

Share your wishes with your family

Injury, illness and death aren't easy subjects to talk about, but by planning ahead you can ensure that you receive the type of medical care you want. You also relieve your family of the burden of trying to guess what you'd want done. Be sure to discuss your wishes with your loved ones. Let them know you're creating advance directives and explain your feelings about medical care and what you'd want done in specific instances.



Fill out the forms for your state

Your advance directives should be in writing. Each state has its own laws regarding advance directives. Although it isn't required, you may want to consult an attorney about this process. State-specific forms are available from a variety of websites, such as the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization.

Once you've filled out the forms, give copies to your doctor, the person you've chosen as your health care agent and your family members. Keep another copy in a safe but accessible place. You might also want to keep a card in your wallet that says you have a living will and where it can be found.

Review your advance directives from time to time

As your health changes or your perspective on life changes, you might reconsider some of your advance directives. Read over your advance directives from time to time to see if you want to revise any of the instructions. You can change your mind about your advance directives at any time.

To revise your advance directives, you follow the same steps you used to create them. Get new advance directive forms to fill out. Discuss your changes with your friends, family and doctor. Then distribute copies of the new advance directives and ask everyone to destroy the earlier version.

If there isn't time to redo the paperwork, you can always cancel your advance directive by telling your doctor and your family. Remember, a living will or medical POA goes into effect only if you are unable to make medical decisions for yourself, as determined by your doctors.

Additional resources:

- For members enrolled in the HealthPartners medical plan:
Log on to your HealthPartners account: <http://www.healthpartners.com/cityofduluth/>
After you log on, select "Health & Wellness" from the three tabs available at the top of the page; on the right side of the page, under "Resources", select "Advance Directives".
- Midwest EAP services available to City of Duluth and Duluth Airport Authority employees
Call 1-800-383-1908 or visit <http://www.midwesteap.com/> (Contact City of Duluth Human Resources at 218-730-5210 for member login information)
- State-specific advance directives can be downloaded on the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) website (<http://nhpco.org/i4a/pages/Index.cfm?pageID=3254>). The NHPCO provides examples of advance directives – willing wills and power of health care attorney appointment forms – for each state on the Web. The NHPCO site contains important disclaimers you should read carefully. In calling the NHPCO site to your attention, the AMA also urges that you consider consulting with your counsel and personal physician.

JAMA (Journal of American Medical Association) Patient Pages:

<http://jama.ama-assn.org/content/284/19/2550.full.pdf>

<http://jama.ama-assn.org/content/283/11/1518.full.pdf>

Additional links provided by the American Medical Association:

<http://www.agingwithdignity.org/>

<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/physician-resources/medical-ethics/about-ethics-group/ethics-resource-center/end-of-life-care/ama-policy-end-of-life-care.page>

http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/uncategorized/2011/2011_aging_bk_myths_facts_hcad_authcheckd_am.pdf