



The Importance of Advance Directives in Today's Healthcare Environment

Death and dying are not easy. It is hard on the patient who is dealing with the emotional and physical side of dying. It is hard on loved ones who are mentally and emotionally dealing with loss. And it is hard on those providing care for the patient and his/her family. Sadly, many Americans die in hospitals and facilities receiving care that is inconsistent with their wishes. Many families and caregivers are left confused when dealing with a loved one's end-of-life journey.

While it can be difficult to do, advance care planning is important for everyone.

It is especially important for older adults, to plan for and prepare your end-of-life wishes, AND make sure your healthcare providers, caregivers, and families know these preferences. These end-of-life wishes are called Advance Directives.

Advance directives are the written, legal instructions regarding medical care preferences if you become unable to make or communicate these decisions for yourself.

In short, Advance Directives will provide clear direction if/when your preferences are no longer able to be vocalized. Advance care planning is the process of thinking through and reflecting on what your preferences would be regarding quality of care. This type of planning allows you to describe what is important to you in regard to your end-of-life care. It is having the hard conversations with your loved ones on your preferences, and then creating written, legal documents to formalize these.

Legal advance directives may include –

- **Power of Attorney:** A medical or healthcare power of attorney is a document in which you name a person to make decisions on your behalf when you are no longer able to do so. Some states may call this a durable power of attorney or health care proxy. This person should NOT be your doctor or a part of your medical care team. This person should meet your state's requirements for a healthcare agent.; be willing and able to discuss medical care and end-of-life issues with you; be trusted to make decisions that adhere to your beliefs and wishes; be trusted to be your advocate should disagreements occur.
- **Living Will:** A written document that spells out what medical treatments you DO and/or DO NOT want to be used to keep you alive, in addition to preferences on other medical decisions – which could include organ donation, pain management, and life-saving treatments. When writing a living will keep in mind what you value in terms of your independence and capabilities and what treatment(s) you'd consider extending your life in general and/or in particular situations. A living will typically address preferences on CPR,



tube feeding, mechanical ventilation, dialysis, medications, hospice or palliative care, and organ or tissue donation.

- Do Not Resuscitate (DNR): A DNR may be included in a living will, but it is a good idea to include an additional DNR order with your specific preferences. This form provides clarification on your preference regarding resuscitation and intubation. Be sure this is in your medical record and established any time you are admitted to a hospital or healthcare facility.

An advance directive is not simply a form you complete and file away. Advance directives need to be thought out, talked about with your doctor, caregivers, and family, then filed in your medical record. You can find the form online or request it from a healthcare provider, healthcare facility, or hospice/palliative care team. Each state has different forms and requirements for creating advance directives. Most forms will need to be signed by a witness and notarized. If you are utilizing a hospice or palliative care service, advance care planning is available from the care team.

Once you have created your advance directives and reviewed the documents with your doctor, healthcare providers, caregivers, and key family members, you should:

- Keep your originals in a secure but accessible location
- Give copies to your doctor, your power of attorney, and keep one copy on your person (in a wallet or file that travels with you)
- Remember who has copies of your advance directives
- Talk to those important in your life about having advance directives, what your preferences are, and why you have them

The last thing you need to remember when completing your advance directives is that it is never too soon to start the process. There's no time like the present. Do not wait until something happens. Emotional and physical situations may affect your decision-making. It is much simpler to reflect on what your preferences are, why you have them, and discuss these preferences when you are not under pressure or emotional turmoil from a diagnosis or prognosis. Talk with your healthcare provider, hospice team, or family member now to start the process of formalizing your medical care preferences.