

caring
for those
you care about

Advance Directives: Planning for the Future

It's never easy to think about one's final days. Fear, anxiety, and denial are just some of the all-too-human emotions that prevent people from taking care of themselves and expressing their wishes at the end of life. Whether you are the victim in an accident or are diagnosed with a serious illness, planning now for your future health care is one of the most important acts you will ever do for yourself and for your loved ones.

The best way to communicate your final wishes is through advance directives. By using these documents, you have more control over the key issues that will impact the quality of your life during your last days. What kind of treatment do you want? More importantly, what *don't* you want? Advance directives give you the power to determine what happens to you, even if you can't speak for yourself, and they give your family, friends, and doctors the vital information needed for your care.

Taking an active role in your end-of-life care isn't just for older persons. Accidents and illnesses can also happen at any time to young people. That's why it is so important to fill out your advance directives now — *before a crisis happens*. This Tip Sheet will help you begin the process of ensuring

quality care at the end of your life and will help you live your life as you wish.

What Are Advance Directives?

Advance directives are written documents that specify what you wish to have happen in the event you become unable to speak for yourself. While some people may feel that filling out an advance directive means that they have given up hope and are refusing treatment, the truth is that these documents are asking that you be treated the way you want to be treated. There are two types of advance directives: a living will and a health care power of attorney.

What Is a Living Will?

A living will is a written document in which you state in writing your preferences for medical treatment at the end of life, should you be unable to speak for yourself. It tells the doctors and medical professionals what your wishes are regarding critical issues, such as using life-prolonging drugs and technology. The living will gives you the right to accept or refuse life-prolonging treatment at the end of life. Your wishes are protected by both federal and state laws. Because each state authorizes the use of living wills

Advance Directives: **Planning for the Future**

differently, you should complete documents recognized by your state.

What Is a Health Care Power of Attorney?

Also called a health care proxy, appointment of health care agent, or durable power of attorney for health care, this document lets you appoint someone you trust to be your advocate and make decisions for you regarding your medical treatment and other health and personal care issues. It is effective only if you are unable to make your own health care decisions. Among those you may choose to serve as your agent are family members and friends.

The health care power of attorney is not the same thing as a durable power of attorney for financial affairs. The durable power of attorney document gives your loved one authority over your financial matters, while the health care power of attorney relates solely to your medical needs.

To complete your advance directives, you do not need a lawyer. However, you may wish to consult with a lawyer to check your own state requirements to find out if your documents will need to be witnessed or notarized.

By appointing a health care power of attorney, you are giving your loved ones a tremendous gift. You are giving them the peace of mind to be able to follow your wishes and to help you during this difficult time.

What Happens If I Don't Sign Any Advance Directives?

In the event that you become sick and cannot speak for yourself, decisions regarding your health care will be made by someone else, usually a family member. All too often, family members — spouses, parents, siblings, and adult children — do not know the wishes of their loved ones regarding treatment and medical decisions during a time of crisis. This creates a situation where your wishes may not be followed since they are unknown.

Don't leave your health care to chance. Take a few moments to fill out your advance directives to ensure that it is *your* voice that will be heard during critical decision making times.

Do I Need Both Documents?

Yes. The living will and the health care power of attorney go hand-in-hand to ensure that your wishes are followed. During your time of crisis, you will need your health care power of attorney agent to speak for you when you can't speak for yourself, and your living will to reflect your wishes in a written, documented form.

How Do I Get These Documents?

You can obtain advance directives from a number of sources, including your doctor, local hospital, or long-term care facility. For more information go to www.aarp.org.

Once I've Completed My Advance Directives, What's Next?

Once you have completed your advance directives, put them away in a safe place, like a safety deposit box or in a desk. Make sure that your loved ones know where to find the documents, if and when they are needed. In addition, you should also ask your doctor to include your advance directives in your medical chart as part of your permanent record.

Doctors and other health care providers are legally obligated to follow advance care directives because they contain your decisions about medical treatments. However, some do not. If you find they are not willing to support your choices, you may consider making changes before a conflict arises.

Equally important, sit down with the person you have chosen as your health care agent and talk about your plans and wishes for end-of-life care. Give your agent a copy of the completed documents, and open the lines of communication between you and your health care agent regarding any issues and concerns that may arise from the documents.

Completing advance directives is just the first step in an ongoing process that highlights communication between you, your health care agent, and the medical professionals responsible for your care.

AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization that helps people 50+ have independence, choice and control in ways that are beneficial and affordable to them and society as a whole. We produce *AARP The Magazine*, published bimonthly; *AARP Bulletin*, our monthly newspaper; *AARP Segunda Juventud*, our bimonthly magazine in Spanish and English; *NRTA Live & Learn*, our quarterly newsletter for 50+ educators; and our website, AARP.org. AARP Foundation is an affiliated charity that provides security, protection, and empowerment to older persons in need with support from thousands of volunteers, donors, and sponsors. We have staffed offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.



601 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20049
www.aarp.org