

Advance directives: peace of mind for whatever the future holds

With age, many of us will lose the ability to make decisions for ourselves. Preparing for this time, whether it comes or not, is wise. An advance directive gives others definite guidance for acting on our wishes and can spare loved ones from losing control over doing what is best for us.

An advance directive is a written document that spells out personal wishes for medical and end-of-life care. By creating this document, we can:

- ▶ Specify the type of medical and end-of-life care we want
- ▶ Appoint someone to make health care decisions for us
- ▶ Choose a guardian
- ▶ Specify rules for our family's involvement in our care
- ▶ Provide instructions regarding medical treatments, burial, cremation, organ donation, and other concerns and wishes



Why no one should be without an advance directive

No one is immune to medical problems or accidents. That's why everyone (not just seniors) should protect their interests with an advance directive.

Legal considerations

All 50 states have laws regarding advance directives. AD's can be legally binding if written according to the particular legislative guidelines of the state in which a person receives health care.

How to set up your advance directive

Most states require that you be a competent adult at least 18 years of age for an AD to be legal.

1. First, think about what actions you want taken or not taken in the event that you can no longer make your own decisions.
2. To write the document, you can either hire a lawyer, or simply fill out forms available on most state government websites. You can also find state-specific forms (as well as more on the topic) on websites from organizations such as the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization.
3. Write your wishes and instructions, and appoint an agent (the trusted person who will make decisions on your behalf, but who cannot be your doctor or other health care provider).
4. Sign the directive in the presence of witnesses and have them sign the document. (Your agent and immediate family cannot be witnesses.)

5. Talk with your agent, family, friends, and physician so that all understand your wishes, and give them copies of your AD so that it will be readily available in the event of an emergency. Distributing copies to your care providers such as a hospital or nursing home is also a good idea. Posting your AD on the registry of your state's websites also enables health care providers access to this document.

6. At any time you may change or revoke your advance directive. Be sure to redistribute a revised AD or destroy copies of a revoked document.

If the time comes...

Your agent has the power to make health care decisions for you, or consult with you, if that is your wish. Your advance directive is you "talking" when you lack decision making ability. Your agent and doctors are required to follow it.

Resources

Many state departments of health offer free advance directive information and forms. The website of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization has links to all state forms at www.caringinfo.org. Many attorneys also offer advance directive services.