



Advance Directives: The Basics

Advance directives are legal documents that allow you to put in writing what kind of health care you would want if you were too ill to speak for yourself. Advance directives most often include the following documentation:

- A health care proxy (durable power of attorney)
- A living will
- After-death wishes

Talking with your family, friends, and health care providers about your wishes is important, but these legal documents ensure your wishes are followed. It's better to think about these important decisions before you are ill or a crisis strikes.

A *health care proxy* (sometimes called a durable power of attorney for health care) is used to name the person you wish to make health care decisions for you if you aren't able to make them yourself. Having a health care proxy is important because if you suddenly aren't able to make your own health care decisions, someone you trust will be able to make these decisions for you.

A *living will* is another way to make sure your voice is heard. It states which medical treatment you would accept or refuse if your life is threatened. Dialysis for kidney failure, a breathing machine if you can't breathe on your own, CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) if your heart and breathing stop, or tube feeding if you can no longer eat are all examples of medical treatment you can choose to accept or refuse.

In some states, advance directives can also include after-death wishes. This may include choices such as organ and tissue donation.

If you already have advance directives, take time now to review them to be sure you are still satisfied with your decisions and your health care proxy is still willing and able to carry out your plans. Find out how to cancel or update them in your state if they no longer reflect your wishes. **Make sure to give your new advance directives to your doctors, proxy, and family members.**

Each state has its own laws for creating advance directives. For more information, contact your health care provider, an attorney, your local Area Agency on Aging, or your state health department.

Tips

1. Keep the original copies of your advance directives where they are easily found.
2. Give the person you've named as your health care proxy, and other concerned family members or friends, a copy of your advance directives.
3. Give your doctor a copy of your advance directives for your medical record. Provide a copy to any hospital or nursing home you stay in.
4. Carry a card in your wallet that states you have advance directives.

Source: Department of Health and Human Services. (2009, September). In *Medicare and you 2010*. Retrieved December 2, 2009, from <http://www.medicare.gov/>

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