



CANCERcare®

800-813-HOPE (4673)  
info@cancercaare.org  
www.cancercaare.org

# fact sheet

## ADVANCE CARE PLANNING: BE PREPARED

**It is possible that a person may become unable to talk to a doctor or make personal medical decisions because of illness or injury. By planning in advance, one can help make sure that their wishes about treatment will be followed. This is true for either a short or long illness. If one does not plan ahead, family may not know what their loved one's wishes are or be allowed to fulfill them.**

### WHY IS ADVANCE CARE PLANNING NECESSARY?

When people are feeling well, it is sometimes difficult for them to think about being ill. It is understandable that many families avoid speaking about serious illnesses and end-of-life concerns. But professionals find that people who spend some time thinking about these issues when they are healthy reduce their worry and stress about the future. They also reduce the burden on their loved ones.

**How can my doctor and I be on the same page?** In order to have a comprehensive relationship with doctors, let them know what your wishes are and provide them with any information and documentation they need. (This is especially important when facing a serious illness.) "Advance care planning" describes the discussions you should have with your family in order to tell the doctor about the care you prefer at the time of serious illness. This will allow your doctor to get to know you better and join you as a partner in your treatment. It will also give you and your family more control over your medical care and a sense of well-being. For the best care, you need to be a team.

**How can I get the best medical care?** We encourage families to talk to one another and discuss the types of care preferred in times of serious illness. These conversations can decrease the stress and burden that family members feel when difficult

decisions have to be made in times of crisis or when loved ones are unable to make decisions for themselves. Having a plan in place in case of emergencies means that everyone has the information to make the most thoughtful decisions.



**Is talking about serious illness or cancer bad luck?** No. Unfortunately, people become ill even if they do not think or talk about it. Health care professionals believe that discussing and planning for serious illness leads to better care and more control for you and your family. Speaking openly about illness leads to better decisions and better quality of life.

**How do I start to think about the kind of health care I want?** Many people choose to speak with their family, friends, their health care team or spiritual leaders when trying to decide the type of care they would want. It is equally helpful to think about the medical care a friend or loved one received at the end of life

(over)

and consider what you valued about their care. Here are some possible questions that might be helpful in starting these types of conversations with your loved ones:

- What does good quality of life mean to you?
- How important is it to you to remain independent?
- Are you concerned about letting another adult make medical decisions for you if you are unable? What worries you most?
- Are there any medical treatments you would surely want when facing the end of life? Any treatments you might refuse?
- When thinking about serious illness, what are you concerned about?
- What role do you want your family to have in making decisions about your health care?
- If your family wants to protect you from receiving information, should the medical team honor these wishes?
- What does “dying with dignity” mean to you?
- What does “dying a peaceful death” mean to you?

**Online Resource:** The Conversation Project ([www.theconversationproject.org](http://www.theconversationproject.org)) can provide additional resources for you and your loved ones.

### **CancerCare® Can Help**

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.  
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## **ADVANCE CARE PLANNING DOCUMENTS**

Advance care planning documents are called “advance directives.”

The best way to make sure your health care wishes are honored is to use one or more of the following legal documents:

**Health care proxy:** a legal document in which you choose another adult and alternate whom you trust to make your medical decisions for you if you aren't able to express your preferences yourself. The person you speak to about this responsibility is called a health care agent.

**A living will:** a document in which a person explains which medical treatments he or she would want to accept and which to refuse, especially at the end of life. The more specific the person is, the more useful this document will be.

The preferred document is the health care proxy since a living will cannot anticipate every complex medical decision. It is very important to appoint a health care agent who is willing and able to apply your values, religious beliefs and preferences to a wide range of situations. Your health care agent should be someone who really knows what kind of care you want, is comfortable making decisions and is able to communicate with medical professionals.

*Edited by Leeann Medina-Martinez, MSW, LMSW  
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**CANCERCARE®**

**National Office • 275 Seventh Avenue • New York, NY 10001**

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