

Because of severe illness, you may not be able to explain to doctors what you would like to happen to you medically. Advance care planning means making decisions ahead of time. This fact sheet gives information on:

- How advanced care planning can help you and your loved ones
- Questions to ask yourself as you plan for future medical decisions
- Advance care planning documents and how to use them



Why Is Advance Care Planning Important?

Many families find speaking about serious illnesses and end-of-life issues difficult, but stress can be lowered when these are discussed before they happen. When your plans are already in place, you and your loved ones can make decisions accordingly.

Here are some steps to take as you consider your future care:

- Think about what your values and wishes are.
- Choose someone you trust to make medical decisions for you, if needed.
- Fill out your advance directive forms
- Discuss your thoughts with your doctors.

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 want. It is equally helpful to think about the medical care a friend or loved one received at the end of life. Consider what you valued about their care.

Is talking about serious illness or cancer bad luck? No. Unfortunately, people become ill even if they do not think or talk about it. 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.



What Are Important Questions to Ask Yourself About End-of-Life Care?

These questions can lead to deeper conversations with your family and other loved ones. You can also talk with your health care team about these issues.

- What does good quality of life mean to you?
- How important is it to you to remain able to take care of yourself?
- Would you let another person make medical decisions for you, if you are unable?
- Are there any medical treatments you want when facing the end of life? Any treatments you might refuse?
- 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” or “dying a peaceful death” mean to you?

The Conversation Project can provide additional resources for you and your loved ones. Visit them at theconversationproject.org.



What Are 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 both of the following legal documents:

Health care proxy. A legal document in which you choose another adult to make medical decisions if you aren’t able to express your preferences yourself. The person you speak to about this responsibility is called a ‘health care agent.’ Read more in our fact sheet “The Role of a Health Care Proxy.”

A living will. A document that explains which medical treatments should be accepted or refused, especially at the end of life. The more specific the document is, the more useful it will be. Read more in our fact sheet “What Is a Living Will?”

A health care proxy is preferred because a living will cannot anticipate every complex medical decision. It is important to appoint a health care agent who is able to apply your values and preferences to a wide range of situations. They should be someone who truly knows what kind of care you want and is able to communicate with medical professionals.

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 resource navigation, 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 master’s-prepared oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

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