Your Guide to an Advance Directive

Planning ahead provides peace of mind to you and your family

Download an advance directive form at www.caringinfo.org.
No one wants to think about being involved in a serious accident, having a debilitating illness or, ultimately, dying. It's often more convenient to view advance directives as being for someone else, or only for older people.

Tragic accidents happen suddenly and to anyone. The leading cause of death for adults under 45 is "unintentional injury." Think car crashes or even recreational activities.

Consider that about 70% of Americans say they would prefer to pass away at home. The actual reality is that most people die in a hospital or other healthcare facility.*

Seeing a loved one nearing the end of their life and unable to communicate is distressing. Without any guidance on what medical treatment they’d want, it can be even harder.

An advance directive allows you to write down what you want – or even what you don't want – ahead of time. You can also use it to name someone to make decisions on your behalf.

**Future treatment decisions**

Writing down your wishes on an advance directive when you're healthy is just as important as when you're sick. You never know when it may be needed.

You may already have an idea of the treatment you'd want toward the end of your life. For instance, if you have a condition you are unlikely to recover from. Or, if you're in a coma with little to no chance of ever waking up.

Without an advance directive, your medical team would typically consult with your nearest family member on treatment options if you were unable to communicate.

Individual members of your family may disagree on what's best. Or, you may want another loved one who knows your wishes better to advocate for you.

Without an advance directive, others may decide things on your behalf that you would not have chosen.

**Guide your medical team**

It is your right to choose your medical care. An advance directive helps you protect that right if you're unable to communicate.

Completing an advance directive can bring peace of mind for both you and your loved ones. An advance directive can help better guide your medical team on the kind of treatment you’d prefer.

After someone dies, it can be common for those left behind to ask whether or not they made the correct decisions.

"Did I do the right thing?" "Is that what they would have wanted?"

An advance directive can help prevent your loved ones from wondering about these things.

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* Final Chapter: Californians' Attitudes and Experiences with Death and Dying.
Completing an advance directive

An advance directive lets you tell your medical team your preferences for both ordinary procedures and your end-of-life care. If you don’t complete one, you would still get medical treatment.

An advance directive allows you to name a person who can make medical decisions on your behalf if you’re unable to.

You decide what goes in an advance directive – you can make it as personalized or as general as you like. After all, it’s your choice and your decision.

A living will, for instance, is part of an advance directive. This is where you can write down your wishes about situations in which you would or wouldn’t want life-sustaining treatment.

An advance directive lets you put all of your preferences about future care into a single form.

If you don’t have an advance directive, you will get the most aggressive treatment possible to keep you alive as long as possible.

Advance directives aren’t legally required. You don’t need to complete one. But it’s a good idea to have one for all the reasons described here.
An advance directive consists of:

A living will
A written statement that outlines the kind of care you would and wouldn't want if you're unable to respond.

A medical decision maker
A person you appoint to speak on your behalf if you are unable to communicate your wishes.

Consider your options

More than 90% of people say talking with loved ones about end-of-life care is important…

but only about 30% have actually done so.*

Stating your preferences for end-of-life care is an important part of your advance directive.

Questions to ask yourself and talk about with others include:

• What matters most to you at the end of life?
• What conditions would/wouldn't be acceptable?
• What would you most want end-of-life treatments to achieve?
• How important is being able to care for yourself?
• Do you have ethical or religious beliefs that could be important?
• What non-medical information would you want your treatment team to know about you?

* The Conversation Project national survey on end-of-life wishes and care.
Younger adults have as much reason to complete an advance directive as anyone else. Advances in medical technology could keep you alive – but unconscious – for decades after a serious accident.

14% of people without an advance directive think they’re too young or healthy to need one!

2 Make it legal

You don’t need a lawyer to prepare or complete your advance directive. (You can, of course, seek legal advice if you want.)

- It must be either signed by you and two witnesses or it may be notarized.
- Only one witness can be a blood relative.
- Witnesses cannot be your medical decision maker or your healthcare provider.
- Being a medical decision maker is not the same as being a financial decision maker.

3 Share it

Tell others where your advance directive is. Think about giving copies to your:

- Medical decision maker
- Doctors
- Hospital
- Close friends and family

Store it

Keep your advance directive safe but accessible (so, not in a safe deposit box).

- Also ask others to put their copy in a safe place.
- And ask that a copy be included in your electronic health record.

Review it

You can review and update your advance directive at any time or as your life and circumstances change such as:

- Yearly
- Marriage/divorce
- Children
- Decline in health
- Advances in medical treatment

1 The Public’s Perspectives on Advance Directives: Implications for State Legislative and Regulatory Policy.
Things to consider for your advance directive

Completing your advance directive can seem frightening. After all, it makes us think – and talk – about dying.

There are many misconceptions about advance directives. They’re not about limiting your care or treatment. They aren't designed to simply "pull the plug" on your life no matter what.

An advance directive is about what you want. It puts you in control.

What matters most to you in life?
How important is your quality of life? What scares you most about dying? If you were suffering a serious illness or injury, what would be most important to you in your treatment?

Asking yourself questions like these can help you complete your advance directive.

It can be useful to review your advance directive annually because your wishes and preferences may change over time.

Quantity vs. quality
It's natural to want to live as long as possible, particularly when you're fit and healthy. But it's not something we can always control.

You may want everything possible done to extend your life, no matter what the outcome or prognosis. Or, you may prefer not to prolong your life in certain situations.

Expressing your end-of-life treatment choices in an advance directive can help make sure that decision is up to you.

Treatment options and outcomes
There are many kinds of treatment that can keep a person alive when the body isn't working properly.

Examples of life-sustaining treatments include tube feeding and ventilators.

Sometimes such measures are temporary, allowing the body to return to normal. In some scenarios, the body cannot function without them.

You can state the circumstances in which you would and wouldn't want such treatment in your advance directive.

However, you should grant your medical decision maker flexibility in making decisions. They may need to apply your wishes in complex situations.
Choosing your medical decision maker

Selecting someone to act as your medical decision maker is an important part of an advance directive.

You have the freedom to choose who that person is (provided they agree to do it).

A medical decision maker can also be called a:

- Healthcare agent
- Healthcare proxy
- Healthcare power of attorney
- Healthcare surrogate

Selecting a person

It's best to pick just one person to be your primary medical decision maker. Having multiple people may lead to disagreements between them about your care.

However, consider asking a second person to be your alternate medical decision maker in case your primary one cannot be contacted when they are needed.

Your medical decision maker cannot be your doctor or a member of your medical care team.

Beginning the discussion

Talking about end-of-life care isn’t easy. As you consider documenting your wishes in an advance directive, you may find it helpful to consult with your doctor. This can help you understand your options so you can make the decisions that are right for you.

Keep in mind that your medical decision maker doesn't need to agree with all of your choices. But they must be OK with enforcing them if that time comes.

Four factors to consider

1. People often choose a close family member or a friend to be their medical decision maker. Make sure they are able and willing to speak for you instead of choosing the medical decisions they might want for you or for themselves.

2. You will need to be comfortable talking about the medical care you’d want if you’re unable to make those decisions yourself. You’ll also need to share your advance directive with them (and, if you like, get their input as you prepare it).

3. Be sure to answer any questions they might have about your choices before the time comes that they need to speak for you.

4. Naming a medical decision maker means that someone you trust will be authorized to evaluate all the facts. They would then apply your wishes, values and priorities to your situation.

Download an advance directive form at www.caringinfo.org.
Advance directive checklist

Here are the steps you can follow to complete your advance directive.

**Begin the conversation**
Before you get started on your advance directive, you may find it helpful to talk about your preferences with different people, such as:
- Your family
- Your friends
- Your healthcare provider
- Your religious or spiritual leaders

These conversations can help you clarify what you want and help others better understand your wishes.

If you like, you can share this booklet with them to explain why you’ve begun this process.

**More resources**

**The Conversation Project**
The Conversation Project is dedicated to helping people talk about their wishes for end-of-life care.

Visit [www.theconversationproject.org/starter-kit/intro](http://www.theconversationproject.org/starter-kit/intro).

**PREPARE**
PREPARE is an interactive website that can help you identify your values and goals for medical care in the future. Visit [www.prepareforyourcare.org](http://www.prepareforyourcare.org).

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**
The CDC offers a variety of resources about advance care planning and related issues. Visit [www.cdc.gov/aging/advancecareplanning](http://www.cdc.gov/aging/advancecareplanning).

**Coalition for Compassionate Care of California (CCCC)**
The CCCC provides online resources that can help you start the planning process and begin the conversation with others. Visit [www.coalitionccc.org/tools-resources/advance-care-planning-resources](http://www.coalitionccc.org/tools-resources/advance-care-planning-resources).

**Download an advance directive form**
Once you’ve thought about medical treatment options and discussed your wishes with those closest to you, you can download an advance directive form at [www.caringinfo.org](http://www.caringinfo.org).

You can choose which sections you want to complete and/or make additions to the advance directive form. Once completed, give copies to your medical decision maker, doctors, medical team and close friends and family.

You also have the right to revise or revoke the form at any time. Remember to share new copies of your advance directive when you update it.