

Advance Directives: Planning for End-of-Life Care

Most of us don't plan for serious illness and death. But, Advance Directives help you make end-of-life preparations, so you can live more fully and comfortably in your final days.

If you wait until you're in the hospital with an acute episode, you may be too sick to make decisions about your treatment. Your family members and your doctor will have to make all the decisions. That's a lot to ask of people. And, they may make decisions you wouldn't have wanted.

Be clear about what you want — and what you don't want.

It's important to talk about the kind of care you'd like with your doctors and your family. Many advisers suggest having these types of talks more than once. Why? Because your priorities and preferences may change over time.

Advance Directives make it official

To make sure your wishes are known, prepare an "Advance Directive" or written documents. Advance directives allow you to control your medical care by sharing your wishes ahead of time. They inform caregivers about your wishes and plans, even if you are too sick to share them.

Advance directives are often used for end-of-life decisions. They usually take the form of one or more documents:

- [A living will](#)
- [A durable medical power of attorney](#)
- [A resuscitation directive](#)

Living Wills

Living wills state what medical care you do and do not want. They make end-of-life decision-making easier for your family and your doctors when you can't speak for yourself.

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Let's say you're in a coma with no chance of regaining consciousness. Your living will tells your doctor things like whether you want to be fed through a feeding tube or an IV line. It can specify whether you want to be put on a ventilator if you can't breathe on your own. And it can also tell them if you want to be kept alive no matter what.

How to write a living will

Your living will can be a very specific document, stating "if this," "then that." Or it can be a relatively broad statement of things you do or do not want done.

Durable Medical Power of Attorney

Hospitals don't want to make healthcare decisions for you and risk a lawsuit. That's why a Durable Medical Power of Attorney (also known as a Durable Power of Attorney for Healthcare) is critical. It allows a trusted agent to make healthcare decisions on your behalf.

The Durable Medical Power of Attorney helps your doctors determine when to stop life-supporting measures. If you don't want any such measures your agent can speak for you.

Resuscitation directives

Advance directives contain information about *resuscitation* or medical care that gets oxygen to your brain if you can't breathe for yourself. This includes CPR, intubation, and ventilators.

In some circumstances, you may not want medical personnel to use any of these methods to keep you alive. In that case, you can create a document called a DNR or Do Not Resuscitate. If you're terminally ill or concerned about quality of life, having a DNR can give you peace of mind.

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Note: Your documents may not be recognized by states other than the one in which they were prepared. If you travel routinely or are having a medical procedure out of state, make sure your documents are legally binding.

How do you write advance directives?

You can write advance directives in several ways. You can get special forms from your doctor or hospital. Or you can have an attorney prepare the documents for you. Or, you can use an online legal service and prepare your advance directive for a small fee.

However, advance directives don't have to be complex legal documents. You can simply write your wishes down. Go over them with your doctor or a lawyer to make sure they understand exactly what you want. When you're satisfied with your documents, have them notarized. Then give copies to your family and your doctor.

Online resources about advance directives

These organizations have information, free forms, or links to online resources:

- [FamilyDoctor.org](https://www.familydoctor.org)
- [The American Bar Association](https://www.americanbar.org)
- [The American Cancer Society](https://www.americancancer.org)
- [The U.S. Living Will Registry](https://www.uslivingwillregistry.org)
- [AARP](https://www.aarp.org)

Communication is the key to end-of-life clarity

Having the right documents is important, but verbal communication matters even more. Make sure you discuss your wishes with your doctor and your family members.

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For more in-depth information on this topic, please visit the [Big Fat Reference Guide \(BFRG\)](#). If you are enrolled in AlphaNet's Subscriber Portal, you can access the BFRG [here](#).