

Advance Directives

Having the Conversation

A guide to documenting healthcare wishes and starting the conversations that matter most.

1. What Are Advance Directives?

Advance directives are legal documents that communicate your healthcare wishes when you cannot speak for yourself. They ensure your voice is heard even when you are unable to participate in medical decisions.

There are two main types of advance directives:

- Living Will — States what treatments you do and do not want
- Healthcare Power of Attorney — Names a person to make medical decisions on your behalf

Important

Advance directives are not just for the dying. Everyone over age 18 should have them. Accidents, strokes, and unexpected illness can happen at any age. Having these documents prepared removes an enormous burden from your family during a crisis.

2. Living Will

A living will states what medical treatments you do and do not want if you become unable to communicate your wishes. It addresses specific interventions:

- CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation)
- Mechanical ventilation (breathing machine)
- Feeding tubes (artificial nutrition and hydration)
- Dialysis (kidney function replacement)

Key Facts About Living Wills

- Only activated when you cannot communicate your own decisions
- Can be changed at any time while you are competent
- Does not take effect while you can still speak for yourself

3. Healthcare Power of Attorney (Healthcare Proxy)

A healthcare power of attorney (also called a healthcare proxy) is a legal document that names a specific person to make medical decisions on your behalf when you cannot make them yourself.

Choosing the right person is critical. Consider these guidelines:

- Choose someone who will honor your wishes, not their own
- Have the hard conversation with them before the crisis
- Make sure they understand your values and what quality of life means to you
- Choose someone who can remain calm under pressure and advocate for you

Important Distinction

A healthcare power of attorney is different from a financial power of attorney. The healthcare proxy makes medical decisions only. You may name the same person for both roles, or different people. Make sure each document is clearly specified.



4. POLST / MOLST Forms

POLST stands for Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (also called MOLST in some states). Unlike an advance directive, a POLST is a medical order — not just a directive. It is signed by a physician and travels with the patient.

A POLST form specifies:

- CPR preference — yes or no
- Level of medical intervention (full treatment, selective treatment, or comfort-focused)
- Artificial nutrition preferences

Recognizing a POLST Form

In most states, the POLST form is printed on bright pink paper so it is immediately recognizable by emergency medical personnel. It should be kept in an accessible location — often posted on the refrigerator or near the front door.

5. DNR Explained in Plain Language

Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) means: if the heart stops or breathing stops, do not attempt CPR.

What DNR Does NOT Mean

A DNR does not mean "do not treat." You will still receive full comfort care, pain management, and all other appropriate medical treatments.

Choosing a DNR is a medical decision, not giving up. It reflects a thoughtful choice about what kind of intervention aligns with your values and goals of care.

6. How to Start the Conversation

Starting the conversation about advance directives can feel overwhelming. Here are some scripts to help you begin:

Conversation starters:

"I've been thinking about something important and I'd love to talk with you about it..."

"I filled out my own advance directive and it made me realize I want to know your wishes too..."

"If something happened and you couldn't tell us what you wanted, what would you want us to know?"

Focus on values, not just procedures:

The most important conversations are about values, not just medical procedures. Ask questions like:

- What does a good day look like to you?
- What are you most afraid of?
- What matters most to you in life?
- When would you say, "That's not living anymore"?

7. Where to Keep Your Documents

Having advance directives is only helpful if people can find them when they are needed. Give copies to the following people:

- Your healthcare proxy (the person you named)
- Your primary care doctor
- Your local hospital
- Your hospice team (if applicable)

Storage Tips Keep the original in an accessible place — not a safe deposit box. Review and update after major life changes (marriage, divorce, diagnosis, death of proxy). Every state honors advance directives, though forms may vary by state. Consider keeping a copy on your phone or in a digital health record.

Sources

1. CaringInfo (NHPCO) — <https://www.caringinfo.org/planning/advance-directives/>
2. American Bar Association — Health Care Advance Directives — https://www.americanbar.org/groups/law_aging/resources/health_care_decision_making/
3. National Institute on Aging — Advance Care Planning — <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/advance-care-planning-health-care-directives>
4. The Conversation Project — <https://theconversationproject.org/>
5. Medicare.gov — Advance Directives — <https://www.medicare.gov/manage-your-health/advance-directives-living-wills>

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