



Advance Directives

What are advance directives? Advance directives are a way of making your wishes known if you are unable to speak for yourself. They allow you to describe the kinds of treatments that you would or would not want if you were very ill. They also let you say *who* you want to make decisions for you if you could not speak for yourself.

Although it is hard to talk about planning at a time when illness becomes very serious, and death may be near, doing so can be a gift to your loved ones. If you become unable to speak for yourself, your family will be asked to make decisions about your care. By creating advance directives, you help prepare them for this.

Making Decisions About Your Health Care

Most people are used to making their own decisions about the treatments they want or don't want. You have the right to accept or reject any medical care that is offered to you, including treatments or procedures that may keep you alive longer.

No one likes to think about being so sick that it becomes impossible to make your own decisions. But people with a serious illness may find themselves in this situation, and it is good to be prepared. It's important to think ahead about who would make decisions for you if you became too ill to make them yourself, and what decisions you would want made.

Some people want "everything done" in the hope of living longer, even if a medical treatment has only a small chance of working and may cause serious side effects. Others feel that, when a disease becomes very serious, their quality of life is more important than just trying to stay alive longer. These people don't want a treatment that has only a small chance of working and could lead to serious side effects.

Making Your Advance Directives

Talk to your doctor about advance directives. In New York State, there are different types of advance directives:

- A **Health Care Proxy** is a legal document that lets you name one or more people who will speak for you in the event that you cannot make your own decisions. These are people who you trust and they become your "health care agents." New York law requires hospitals, nursing homes, and health care centers to provide you with a Health Care Proxy form and information about it, and assist you in completing it if you need help.

It is important that the person you want to name as your agent knows that you are doing this and also knows something about your wishes concerning medical treatments. It is best that you and your agent have a talk now about your values and preferences. You should discuss the kind of decisions that you would make if you were very ill and were faced with a choice about a treatment that has a small chance of prolonging your life but could have severe side effects.

When completing your Health Care Proxy, you may include a statement of your treatment wishes, or you can complete a separate Living Will. On the Health Care Proxy, you can also state anything you don't want your agent to do. You and two witnesses must sign and date the form. Neither your agent nor your alternate agent can serve as witnesses. If you are unable to sign your proxy, another adult can sign for you at your request.

- A **Living Will** is a document that explains your health-care wishes, especially about end-of-life care. You cannot use a Living Will to name a health care agent; you must use a Health Care Proxy for that. When you create a Living Will, you write a statement regarding your personal health care wishes. You and two witnesses must sign and date it.
- A **Do Not Resuscitate Order (DNR)** only expresses your wish to not have cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)—that is, emergency treatment to try to restart your heart and lungs if your heartbeat or breathing stops. CPR involves pushing hard on the chest to pump blood and mouth-to-mouth breathing. The DNR order only means CPR will not be performed. All your needs for basic medical care and comfort, including treatment for all injuries, pain, breathing difficulties, and other medical conditions, must be provided.

A **Hospital DNR Order** will be discussed with you if you are in a hospital or other health care facility. If you are at home, you may want to ask your doctor or nurse to get a **Non-Hospital DNR Order**. You can also make your wishes about DNR known in your Health Care Proxy or Living Will.

After You Complete Advance Directives

No matter what type of advance directive you have, there are a number of things to do after it is signed.

- Make several copies and keep one at home in a safe place.
- Let others in the family know where it is.
- Give copies to your health care agent, alternate agent, close family members, your doctors, and anyone else you choose to involve in your health care.
- Under New York law, any doctor who is given a Health Care Proxy form must arrange for a copy of the form to be put in your medical record.
- Consider carrying a wallet card giving information about the existence and location of your Health Care Proxy or Living Will.

Key Points to Remember:

- You can make decisions to accept or reject medical care of any type. To do so, you should ask your doctor for complete information about your illness, and about the risks and benefits of each treatment.
- If your illness becomes very serious and you become unable to speak for yourself, your values and preferences about care will be respected if you have an advance directive.
- Advance directives are for everyone, and the best time to put one in place is when you are relatively well.
- Remember that an advance directive can be cancelled or changed at any time.

Patient Education Series

Advance Directives

If you would like help in connecting with resources, talk to the doctor, nurse or social worker at your health center.