Advance Directives - What You Need to Know?

An **advance directive** is an oral or written document designed to allow you the opportunity to guide future health care decisions in the event that you may become unable to participate and speak for yourself. As long as you are able to express your own decisions, the advance directive will not be used. However, it is important for everyone to have an advance directive in the event that you are unconscious or too ill to communicate. With an advance directive, health care providers cannot treat you against your will.

**Most states have two types of advance directives:**
- **Living Will** – is a written document in which you put your wishes about medical treatment at the end of life.
- **Medical Power of Attorney** – is a written document that allows you to appoint someone you trust to make decisions about your medical care if you are unable to communicate those decisions yourself, at any time in your life.

Both federal and state laws govern the use of advance directives. All 50 states recognize the use of advance directives; however forms need to be executed according to the laws of the specific state. (Therefore, if you move to another state, you should complete a new advance directive).

Most states now combine the Living Will and the Medical Power of Attorney into one document. In one section of the document you state your wishes about a wide range of medical decisions, including end-of-life treatment. In another section you appoint your agent.

**What steps should be taken to complete an advance directive?**

1. Get information from your physician about medical treatments and their effects. It is important to discuss your health, treatments you may need to receive, and how you feel about them. Raise the issue of an advance directive with your physician if he/she has not already done so. Be sure you also discuss this issue with the person you designate as your health care agent. Choosing your agent is one of the most important decisions you will make. This person must understand your wishes and agree to accept responsibility. Your agent will be immune from liability and will not be responsible for your financial issues.

2. Complete the advance directive form, which may be obtained from your physician, hospital, local health department, or other health care facility. You do not need a lawyer to complete the form but you do need to think about your decisions very carefully and discuss these issues with your family, physician, and your designated agent. Your advance directive must be witnessed according to the laws of your state. You may change your written decisions at any time, and you may also add additional detailed instructions about your health care wishes on attached sheets of paper. (Any changes or additions must be signed, dated, and witnessed again).

3. Let your physician and health care facility know that you have completed an advance directive. Keep the original in a safe place, make copies for your family, your health care agent, your physician(s), and anyone else who may be called in the event that you have a medical emergency. Take a copy with you if you are going to be admitted to a hospital or other type of health care facility.

For more information about advance directives, contact:
- AARP (800) 424-3410 at [www.aarp.org/programs/advdir/](http://www.aarp.org/programs/advdir/)
- Partnership for Caring (800) 989-9455 at [www.partnershipforcaring.org](http://www.partnershipforcaring.org)
- Your state’s Medical Association

This information is provided for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for sound medical judgement. If you have any questions or concerns, you should discuss them with your physician.

**Resources:**
- AARP
- Partnership For Caring

**Related Healthy Living Links:**
- Today’s Health and Wellness Magazine