



Understanding Advance Directives

“Advance directives” are legal documents that allow you to plan and make your own end-of-life wishes known in the event that you are unable to communicate. Advance directives consist of (1) a living will and (2) a medical (healthcare) power of attorney. A living will describes your wishes regarding medical care. With a medical power of attorney you can appoint a person to make healthcare decisions for you in case you are unable to speak for yourself.

1. *A living will* is an advance directive that guides your family and healthcare team through the medical treatment you wish to receive if you are unable to communicate your wishes. According to your state’s living will law, this document is considered legal as soon as you sign it and a witness signs it, if that’s required. A living will goes into effect when you are no longer able to make your own decisions.
2. *A medical power of attorney* is the advance directive that allows you to select a person you trust to make decisions about your medical care if you are temporarily or permanently unable to communicate and make decisions for yourself. This includes not only decisions at the end of your life, but also in other medical situations. This document is also known as a “healthcare proxy,” “appointment of healthcare agent” or “durable power of attorney for healthcare.” This document goes into effect when your physician declares that you are unable to make your own medical decisions. The person you select can also be known as a healthcare agent, surrogate, attorney-in-fact or healthcare proxy. When selecting my medical power of attorney

You should select someone you trust, such as a close family member or good friend who understands your wishes and feels comfortable making healthcare decisions for you. You should have ongoing conversations with this person to talk about your wishes at the end of life. Make sure your medical power of attorney feels comfortable and confident about the type of medical care you want to receive.

Most state laws prevent your doctor or any professional caregiver from being assigned as your healthcare agent. You can also select a second agent as an alternate in case your first healthcare agent is unwilling or unable to serve.