



ADVANCE DIRECTIVES

Frequently Asked Questions

Information for Patients

Q: What is an advance directive?

A: An advance directive, or living will, allows you to assert what “life-prolonging procedures” you want or do not want if you may become incapacitated and are unable to make judgments about your own health. You may also name an individual referred to as an “agent,” otherwise called a “health care power of attorney,” to make decisions for you at any point you are unable to make them for yourself. Advance directives allows for specific details on how your medical care should be handled in case you find yourself in one of these situations.

Q: What is the importance of an advance directive?

A: It is important to have an advance directive in times of medical crisis when you are not capable of making medical decisions on your own. An advance directive will give your family clear guidance and decrease uncertainty during a tough time by having your wishes plainly expressed on issues such as the use of feeding tubes, ventilators, resuscitation and other life-prolonging procedures.

Q: What sort of health care decisions are included and protected with an advance directive?

A: Decisions about surgery, medication, mental health treatment, hospital admission or any other health care may be specified on the form. If you are unsure or have ambivalence with respect to specific decisions, you are not required to specify them in the advance directive. You may, at a minimum, designate an agent who is familiar with your values and beliefs to make these types of decisions for you. The law states that your agent cannot make decisions that he or she knows are in opposition to your religious beliefs, core values, and listed preferences.

Q: What if I change my mind?

A: You may cancel or modify your advance directive at any time, but it is important that you tell others that you have cancelled or changed your advance directive. You should give copies of your modified advance directive to your agent (if there is one specified), your physician, and your close family and friends.

Q: What if I have a terminal condition?

A: “Living wills” are one set of instructions in an advance directive for your agent if you were to ever have a terminal condition in which a doctor has concluded that there is no chance for recovery from a persistent vegetative state. Signing this statement will notify doctors or family as to whether you want to cease or continue “life-prolonging procedures.”

Q: Why is it important that it be dealt with now?

A: Medical emergencies are occurring all of the time where patients are in a condition in which they cannot make decisions for themselves. To ensure that your wishes are carried out properly and to diminish stress on your family and those that are in charge of your medical decisions, it is important to create one early, before you need it.

Q: How do I fill out my own advance directive?

A: An advance medical directive form has been created individually for each state. For Virginia’s form, please visit www.msv.org/advancedirective or contact your local Area Agency on Aging.

Q: Do I need an attorney or a notary to fill one out?

A: It is not necessary to use an attorney to complete the form, however some people may find it beneficial receiving advice and finding out what medical issues could surface. In Virginia, the advance directive form does not need to be notarized in order to be valid.

For more information about advance directives, contact your physician.