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Please note: This information was as current as we could make it on the date given above. But medical information is always changing, and some information given here may be out of date. For regularly updated information on a variety of health topics, please visit familydoctor.org, the AAFP patient education Web site.

Information from Your Family Doctor

What You Should Know About Advance Directives

Am Fam Physician. 2012 Mar 1;85(5):467.

See related article on [advance directives](#).

What is an advance directive?

An advance directive is a legal document that says how you want to be cared for if you are unable to make decisions. You can include what medical treatments you would want and who you would trust to make decisions for you.

An advance directive can also include other legal documents. A living will is a list of treatment preferences. It can be used to indicate whether you would want cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), tube feedings, a breathing machine, or certain medicines, like antibiotics.

The durable power of attorney for health care document identifies the person you would want to make medical decisions for you. This person is also called a proxy. Your proxy should be familiar with your values and wishes.

How do I get started?

You can get advance directive documents for your state from your doctor's office or from <http://www.caringinfo.org>. Review the forms, and ask your doctor if you have any questions. Pick a person to be your proxy, and talk it over with that person.

What should I include?

Be specific. Avoid terms like "terminally ill" or "no heroics." These words can mean different things to different people. Situations to consider might include if you are permanently unconscious or become dependent on the care of others to survive. Try to emphasize what is most important to you in a variety of situations.

A witness should sign the form. A notary may also need to sign it. Keep a copy in a safe place, and tell family

members and your proxy where it is. Give your doctor a copy and ask him or her to put it in your medical record at the office and at your hospital.

What happens after I complete it?

Your advance directive can be changed or canceled any time. It is important to continue discussing your wishes with your doctor and proxy.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

Web site: <http://familydoctor.org/003.xml>

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

This information provides a general overview and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your family doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject.

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