What is a health care directive?
A health care directive is the plan you make for your future health care. It is sometimes called an advance directive.

In this plan, you explain your treatment choices. You also may name a person to make these choices for you if you can’t make them yourself. This person is your health care agent. You may put a copy of your health care directive in your medical record.

You don’t have to make a health care directive. If you choose not to, you will still get the care you need.

Can I change my health care directive?
Yes. You can change it at any time, as long as you can make decisions for yourself. Let your health care agent and care team know about your changes.

Whom should I choose as my health care agent?
Many people select a close family member or friend. The person you choose should be someone:

- You can trust
- Who is willing to accept the responsibility
- Who will follow your wishes even if they don’t agree with them
- Who can handle making difficult decisions under stress

You may want to choose one other person in case your first choice can’t or won’t be your agent. Often, one agent serves at a time. But it may be helpful to talk with both people together about your choices.

Advance care planning guide

There is no easy way to plan for future health care choices. It’s a process that involves thinking and talking about complex and sensitive issues.

You have the right to have your care team tell you about your medical choices. They also should explain the benefits and risks in a way you can understand. You also have the right to accept or refuse these choices.

Use this guide to help share your feelings with your health care team, family, friends and religious or spiritual advisors. Think about the treatments you would want. No matter what you decide, it’s important to talk about your choices with the people who are closest to you. You may also want to put your choices in writing.

It’s not easy to talk about these issues. But for your loved ones, it may be even harder to make decisions without knowing what you want.

Health Care Directive

What is a health care directive?
A health care directive is the plan you make for your future health care. It is sometimes called an advance directive.

In this plan, you explain your treatment choices. You also may name a person to make these choices for you if you can’t make them yourself. This person is your health care agent. You may put a copy of your health care directive in your medical record.

You don’t have to make a health care directive. If you choose not to, you will still get the care you need.

How do I get a health care directive?

When is my health care directive used?
As long as you can make your own choices, you control your own medical care. If you can’t make choices for yourself, your health care team will follow your wishes as described in your health care directive.
What if I am injured or get ill while away from home?

Be sure to talk about your choices with your health care agent. Your agent also should have a copy of your health care directive to help make sure you receive the care you want.

What happens in an emergency?

In an emergency, your health care team may start treatments to prolong your life. Your care team will stop these treatments if they learn of your health care directive wishes.

Do I need a lawyer to complete a health care directive?

No. The law does not require you to have a lawyer.

Advance Care Planning

How can I plan for future medical situations?

You can’t plan for every event. But you don’t have to. Plan for situations where you:
- Suddenly can’t make your own decisions
- Aren’t likely to recover
- Had a major injury or loss of function (for example, a brain injury from an accident, a stroke or a slow disease, such as Alzheimer’s)

How can I talk about these situations with my loved ones?

First, plan for yourself. Then let your family or friends know what you want. Tell your loved ones you don’t want them feeling burdened to make decisions for you. Then, ask them to tell you what they would want for themselves.

Who do I talk to?

Talk to those who are most likely to be involved if you are very ill. Just because you are close doesn’t mean that your loved one knows what you want for future medical care. If you need help talking to family and friends, ask your care team if you can speak with a facilitator.

What should I talk about?

Talk about:
- Who should make choices for you
- How they should make those choices
- Your goals for medical care if you had a serious, permanent injury to your brain
- How bad an injury would be for you to say, “Don’t use medical treatments to keep me alive in that state.” Many people say “No heroics.” Or “If I’m going to be a vegetable, let me go.” “Don’t keep me alive on machines.” But these statements are not specific enough to guide decision-making.

You must describe how and when your care should change from trying to keep you alive to letting you die naturally. Sometimes, certain treatments may not help you recover to a quality of life that you would want. But other treatments may offer comfort. Ask yourself:
- When would I want to continue treatment to try to stay alive and seek recovery?
- When would I want to stop or withhold certain treatments and accept death?
- When would I want comfort care? What kinds of comfort care would I want (for example, medicine or spiritual support)?

Do I need to talk with my doctor?

Talking to your doctor can be very helpful. Your doctor can check that your health care directive is clear and complete. Your doctor also can tell you whether your health care team will support your wishes.