Health care agent

You have been chosen by ____________________________ to be a health care agent.

Here’s information to help you understand what it means to be a health care agent and how to prepare for this role.

What is a health care agent?
A health care agent is an individual chosen to make health care decisions for someone who isn’t able to make their own decisions. These decisions may be about end-of-life care. Often, one or more doctors decide when someone can’t make their own decisions.

What does it mean to be a health care agent?
Being a person’s health care agent means making the decisions that they would make if they were able. The person trusts you to follow their wishes. A health care agent should be able to answer “Yes” to these questions:

- Am I willing to take on this role and responsibility?
- Do I know the person’s wishes for future medical decisions?
- Can I make the decisions they would want me to make, even if I disagree with them?
- Can I make major medical decisions under stressful situations?

If you answer “No” to any of these questions, talk about your concerns with the person who chose you.

What types of decisions would I make as a health care agent?
You may need to make decisions about:

- Medical care or services, such as tests, medicine and surgery
- Stopping treatment, if this is the person’s stated wish or in their best interest
- Interpreting the person’s wishes
- Reviewing and releasing medical records
- Moving the person to another care center
- Choosing health professionals and organizations to provide care
How can I prepare myself to be a health care agent?

Talk to the person who chose you as an agent when they are able to make their own choices. Understand their wishes for future medical care. Make sure to talk about medical decisions that may come at the end of life. You may need to talk from time to time to make sure their choices haven’t changed.

Sometimes people make general statements about what they would want in certain situations:

- “I want to die with dignity.”
- “Don’t keep me alive if I’m a vegetable.”
- “Just make me comfortable.”

These kinds of statements mean different things to different people. Ask the person who chose you as an agent to tell you in detail what they mean.

Some people want their health care agent to follow their stated wishes exactly. Other people want their agent to have leeway in making decisions. Find out how much leeway you have. Ask:

- “Is it more important to follow your instructions just as they are written?”
- “Or, should I consider your instructions along with other information and do what seems best at the time?”

Go with the person to doctor appointments when possible. You and the doctor can get to know each other. Ask questions about the person’s health condition and choices about their care.

You may want to talk to other professionals who help people make medical decisions. They include advance care planning facilitators, social workers, and religious and spiritual leaders.

Remember: Talking about these issues may be uncomfortable. But the more you understand and clarify what someone wants, the more confident you may feel to serve as their health care agent. Your concern and commitment are truly an act of love.