

# YOUR CHOICE

Make your wishes known about the medical care you want should you not be able to speak for yourself.



## **Deciding about your health care**

None of us know what the future holds, but we all know that there will likely come a time when we will become too sick or badly hurt to speak for ourselves.

So, why not think about what medical care you would want or not want in these situations and write it down now? You should also think about who you would want to speak for you if you're not able to speak for yourself.

What you'll be doing is creating an advance directive, and you're never too young to start.

### **What is an advance directive?**

An advance directive is a form that you fill out to tell your doctor and family what kind of medical care you want if you are too sick or hurt to talk or make decisions. If you do not have one, certain members of your family will have to decide on your care based on what they think you would have wanted.

In Alabama, you must be at least 19 years old to fill out an advance directive. You must be able to think clearly and make decisions for yourself when you fill it out, and you do not have to have a lawyer to complete one, although you may want to talk with one about it since these are important decisions.

### **Types of advance directives**

In Alabama, there are several types of advance directives, including:

**A living will** - This is used to write down ahead of time what kind of care you do or do not want if you are too sick to speak for yourself.

**A Proxy** - This is someone you pick to speak for you and make the choices you would make if you could. If you pick a proxy, talk to that person and be sure he/she knows how you feel about different kinds of medical treatments.

Another way to pick a proxy is to sign a durable power of attorney for health care. The person you pick does not need to be a lawyer.

You can choose to have any or all of these three advance directives: Living will, proxy, and/or durable power of attorney for health care.

Hospitals, home health agencies, hospices and nursing homes usually have forms you can fill out if you are ready to write down your wishes. If you have questions about the medical decisions, talk with your doctor. If you have any legal questions, check with your own lawyer or call your local Council on Aging for help.

### **What do I need to decide?**

You will need to decide if you want treatments or machines that will make you live longer even if you will never get better. An example of this is a machine that breathes for you. Some people do not want machines or treatments if they cannot get better. But they may want

food and water through a tube or pain medication. With an advance directive, you decide what medical care you want.

## **Talk to your doctor and family now**

Talk to your family and doctor now so they will know and understand your choices. Give them a copy of what you have signed. If you go to the hospital, give a copy of your advance directive to the person who admits you to the hospital.

The law says doctors, hospitals, and nursing homes must do what you want or send you to another place that will. Before you fill out an advance directive, talk to your doctor ahead of time. Find out if your doctor is willing to go along with your wishes. If your doctor does not feel that he or she can carry out your wishes, you can ask to go to another doctor, hospital, or nursing home.

Once you decide on the care you want or do not want, talk to your family. Explain why you want the care you have decided on. Find out if they are willing to let your wishes be carried out. There are times family members do not want to go along with an advance directive. Typically, this happens when they do not know about a patient's wishes ahead of time.

## **You can change your mind**

As long as you can speak for yourself, you can change your mind any time about what you have written down. If you make changes, tear up your old papers and give copies of any new forms or changes to everyone who needs to know.

## **Two Other Options in Alabama:**

- **Order for Pediatric Palliative and End of Life Care** - This can be used when a physician finds the pediatric patient is terminally ill with no hope for recovery - [www.adph.org/ems/forms](http://www.adph.org/ems/forms)
- **Portable Do Not Resuscitate (DNR)** Allows your wishes about resuscitation to be followed by those who respond in an emergency and those in another facility if you are being transferred. [www.adph.org/ems/forms](http://www.adph.org/ems/forms)

## **For help or more information:**

**Alabama advance directive forms**  
[www.alaha.org/advancedirectives](http://www.alaha.org/advancedirectives)

**For help with the conversation** - This website has some terrific resources on how to have these important conversations with your family and doctor and how to pick a healthcare proxy - [www.theconversationproject.org](http://www.theconversationproject.org).

**For legal help** - Your local Area Agency on Aging may offer legal assistance. Call 1-800-243-5463 to check on your area.

