

# Advance Directives

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## Definition: What are Advance Directives?

Advance directives are written healthcare wishes that tell people what you want if you are unable to speak for yourself due to illness or injury.

Advance directives are for physicians, caregivers and family so that everyone can understand what a patient wants to happen even when he or she can no longer communicate.

Advance directives are also called healthcare directives or living wills.

In an advance directive, a person writes down their preferences for treatment options (including the use of feeding tubes and respirators) and designates a healthcare agent, who will speak for them when they are sick. The healthcare agent should be someone close to the person who understands their wishes.

Some things to remember:

- You can change your advance directive if you change your mind.
- It's important to talk to your family and your physician about your advance directive so there is no confusion about your wishes.
- Keep copies of your advance directive out where it can be easily found.

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## Ethical Issues

Advance directives are usually regarded as very worthwhile documents. However, there are still ethical issues to consider:

- Some concerned groups have raised the ethical issue that advance directives that ask to limit heroic measures may be misinterpreted.
- Arguments often arise over whether or not advance directives work. Some groups say they are effective, while others say they are not.
- Ethical concerns are frequently raised about cultural sensitivity concerning advance directives.
- Advance directives raise moral issues about how many resources the U.S. devotes to saving and sustaining lives.
- Advance directives raise issues of patient autonomy.

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## Links

Caring Connections, a program of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, is a national effort to improve care at the end of life. It can be found online at <http://www.caringinfo.org>.

FIVE WISHES is an easy-to-read healthcare directive form designed for people who are unfamiliar with the healthcare system and technical health information. It can be purchased for \$5.00 online at <http://www.agingwithdignity.org>.

The Minnesota Healthcare Directive can be downloaded at <http://www.mnaging.org/advisor/directive.htm>

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## Suggested Reading

### Books

Advance Directives and the Pursuit of Death with Dignity  
Norman L. Cantor; Indiana University Press (1993).

Choices at the End of Life: Finding Out What Your Parents Want Before It's Too Late.

Linda Norlander and Kerstin McSteen; Fairview Press (2001).

Making Sense of Advance Directives (Clinical Medical Ethics)

Nancy M.P. King; Georgetown University Press (1996).

You Decide: Using Living Wills and Other Advance Directives to Guide Your Treatment Choices.

Evelyn J. Van Allen; Irwin Professional Publications (1993).

## Articles

Moldow G. Bartels D. Brunnquell D. Cranford R. Why Address Futility Now?: Model Guidelines for Addressing Medical Futility in End-of-Life Care.

Minnesota Medicine, 2004. Volume 87. Available online at

<http://www.mmaonline.net/publications/MNMed2004/June/Moldow.html>.

Living wills and healthcare proxies.

Grimms, JS. *Ethics and Medics* March 2001; 26(3):3-4.

Living wills clarify your values, wishes.

Bartels, D. Health Talk & You--University of Minnesota August 5, 2005

<http://www.healthtalk.umn.edu/healthtalk/topics/livingwill/home.html>

Thinking ahead: Factors associated with executing advance directives.

Rosnick CB, Reynolds SL. *Journal of Aging & Health* May 2003, 15(2):409-29.

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## Facts & Statistics

The Federal Government passed the Patient Self-Determination Act (PSDA) in 1990. This act requires that all hospitals that receive federal funding recognize and honor healthcare directives if patients can no longer speak for themselves.

All fifty states and the District of Columbia have advance directive laws.

Some estimates say that less than 5% of people over age 65 have advance directives.

