




ADVANCE CARE PLANNING: a loving act

Ensuring your loved one's end-of-life wishes are honored

In no circumstance is end-of-life care an easy conversation, but if you ever find yourself needing to make those tough decisions for a loved one, it's comforting to know what they want. Advance care planning helps ensure their wishes are clearly understood and respected.



A study by VITAS Healthcare found that while 56% of people reported having discussed their end-of-life wishes with family, only 35% have documented them. This can leave loved ones facing difficult decisions during an already emotional time.

By having a series of meaningful conversations and preparing the necessary documents, you can help ease the stress associated with such a responsibility.

Advance care planning documents

The most crucial part of advance care planning is the discussions with your loved one about their choices for medical treatment at the end of their life. It's also important for them to record their preferences in legal documents that can be shared with medical professionals.

Advance directives are the documents that fall under the advance care planning umbrella, and can include:

- A living will lets you approve or decline specific medical care, even if it means death is imminent. Generally, this document can be used to decline life-prolonging treatments. In some states, it only applies under certain circumstances such as terminal illness or injury, but it's still valuable to document your wishes.
- A durable power of attorney for healthcare, also known as a healthcare proxy or surrogate, lets you appoint a representative to make medical decisions for you and specify the extent of their authority.
- A do not resuscitate (DNR) order instructs medical personnel not to perform CPR if you go into cardiac arrest or breathing ceases. There are two types of DNRs, one that is effective all the time and another that is only effective while you're hospitalized.

While a living will might not seem essential if there's a healthcare proxy, having a written document to help guide specific treatment preferences is ideal. The more information you have about your loved one's wishes, the better you can ensure those wishes are carried out.

Something to note is that advance directives can always be updated as circumstances change; don't be afraid to establish them early. A significant medical event or major family change can prompt a reevaluation at any time.



Creating a lasting legacy

Advance care planning offers a chance for your loved one to reflect on their life and share their story with future generations. Encourage them to create videos, catalog pictures or write in journals that can be cherished and passed down. There are tools and services, like Storyworth and Remento, that make it easy to create keepsake memoir books, ensuring your loved one's memories live on.



Advance care planning objectives

At the heart of overseeing your family member's care is respecting their choices regardless of your personal feelings. Even if you have opinions that conflict with theirs, they chose you to implement their plan because they trust you to follow it as they've outlined. This also means understanding their religious and cultural preferences, and how these will influence their end-of-life care.



The goals of advance care planning are to respect individual patient autonomy, improve quality of care and reduce overtreatment. By partnering with your loved one in preparation, you can strengthen your bond and make them feel at ease about the care they'll receive as they age.

Sadly, differing opinions about end-of-life care can make it tough for families to reach a mutual agreement about how to care for their loved one. Having advance directives in place ensures the patient's orders are prioritized.

Doctors may not always start advance care planning conversations with patients, so advance care planning tasks often are left to family members or close friends. Seeking support from others who've undergone the planning process may help. Additionally, numerous government, legal and medical resources are available – from conversation starters from the National Institute on Aging to advance directive forms by state from AARP.

Implementing an advance care planning


The purpose of advance care planning is to be prepared to make decisions that align with your family member's values. Even with a living will, some scenarios may not be clearly outlined. If this is the case, decision-making


strategies can guide a healthcare proxy's choices.

Substituted judgement, the preferred decision-making method, involves putting yourself in the place of the person needing care and trying to choose as they would. This may mean remembering your loved one's strong opinions about a neighbor's care choices and what types of medical care they'd refuse.


The "best interests" approach, sometimes used in conjunction with substituted judgment, involves considering whether a specific treatment is in your family member's best interest; in other words, whether it improves quality of life or simply extends a condition of pain and discomfort.

When making these decisions, think about what your family member believed gave their life meaning and purpose, and whether they can still participate in those activities. This intimate knowledge, along with input from medical professionals, should guide your choices.

While the topic is uncomfortable to broach, remember that making care decisions for your family member if they're unable to do so is a loving act. With thoughtful discussions and thorough documentation, you'll be prepared to honor your loved one's requests if the time comes. 



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Sources: VITAS Healthcare, AARP, BMC Palliative Care, National Institute on Aging

