

Medical Decisions – Who Can Make Them?

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You are fully in control of your health care. But who will be in control if you become incapacitated? Without a legal document in place, no one can legally speak on your behalf.

An Advance Health Care Directive (AHCD) is a document that instructs others about your care should you be unable to make decisions on your own. This document becomes effective only under the circumstances delineated in the document (usually, but not always, at your incapacity).

Your AHCD names an “Agent” who will voice your health care decisions. Usually you will name a primary Agent as well as an optional secondary Agent just in case your primary choice is unavailable or incapable of acting. The document also asks you to answer questions regarding your health care wishes. It asks your thoughts on many questions that may come up in a medical situation: pain relief, organ donation, and most importantly, your wishes regarding life support.

Health Care Directives are mainly known for their life support question – do you want life support or not, if things seem very grim. While it is very, very important to answer this question in the document, it is also very important to talk about your thoughts on this with those persons you name in your document. It is quite difficult to check a box that says “no” to life support. After all, you cannot even think about every sort of possibility that could happen with your health care. Talking with your Agent about your thoughts will allow for your Agent to understand your reasons behind your answers. It will make your document that much more reflective of your wishes because your Agent will truly know and understand your medical wishes.

Once you have your Health Care Directive completed and signed, keep it somewhere safe and accessible. Someone around you should know where to find it if it should ever become necessary. You may want to give a copy of your AHCD to your physician to keep in your medical file. Also, if you ever go into the hospital for a known procedure, be sure to bring along a copy. If you do not, you will most likely have to complete one on the spot.

If you have children that are 18 (or older), make sure that they have completed an AHCD as well. Until your child is 18 years of age, you can speak on behalf of them. But as soon as your child is 18, you have no rights over them. They must complete their own Health Care Directive so that you could make their health care decisions on their behalf if it was ever necessary.