

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is an Advance Healthcare Directive?

An Advance Healthcare Directive is a set of written instructions expressing your wishes for medical treatment and end-of-life care, including organ and tissue donations. A discussion of Advance Healthcare Directives touches on sensitive matters. Most of us would rather not think about being sick or dying. But, by considering these issues now, you can save your family and those close to you the burden of having to make choices for you without your guidance. Talking with your family, physician, religious advisor, and others whose views you respect may help you make decisions best suited for you.

Q. What are the components of an Advance Healthcare Directive?

An Advance Healthcare Directive often contains a Healthcare Power of Attorney (where you name a person called a “Healthcare Agent” who can make treatment decisions for you). An Advance Healthcare Directive also typically contains a Living Will (healthcare treatment instructions about your choices to start, continue, refuse, or stop life-preserving treatment, as well as other specific directions about end-of-life care and your views regarding organ and tissue donations). The attached form contains both a Living Will and a Healthcare Power of Attorney.

Q. If I am unable to make or communicate decisions, what happens if I don't have an Advance Healthcare Directive?

If you do not designate a Healthcare Agent, a Healthcare Representative may be selected for you according to Pennsylvania law. However, this selected person may not be the one you wish to make decisions for you.

Without a Living Will to express your wishes, your family members may not know what to do at this difficult time, or may disagree about what care to give you. Simply put, without an Advance Healthcare Directive, your wishes may not be followed.

Q. What is a Healthcare Agent?

A Healthcare Agent is a person you choose to make healthcare decisions for you. You can name a family member or a friend who is familiar with your beliefs and values to interpret your instructions and to make these decisions. This Healthcare Agent can authorize, withhold or withdraw treatment.

Q. When does my Healthcare Agent speak for me?

This form gives your Healthcare Agent the power to speak for you when you cannot make decisions for yourself. At any time, if you get better and are again able to make your own decisions, you may always do so. In this form, you can also choose to give your Healthcare Agent the power to speak for you immediately, if you wish. If you wish to have your Healthcare Agent make decisions for you when you can communicate, you should personally inform your attending physician, who should record this choice in your medical record.

If you have any questions about your Healthcare Agent, you may wish to consult with your attorney and physician to be sure that your wishes are clearly expressed.

Q. Should I talk to my Healthcare Agent about my wishes?

Absolutely. You should be sure that the person you choose is willing to act as your Healthcare Agent. It is also very important that you discuss your wishes with your Healthcare Agent so that your Healthcare Agent understands your wishes and priorities as well as possible.

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Frequently Asked Questions (*Continued*)

You should also tell your Healthcare Agent whether you want to donate organs, or donate eyes, hands, facial tissue, limbs, or other parts of your body. Donation of hands, limbs or facial tissue could impact funeral arrangements (for example, an open casket may not be possible).

Q. Will my Healthcare Agent be responsible for my medical bills?

No. Your Healthcare Agent makes decisions about your care. The cost of this care is your responsibility or the responsibility of your insurance company.

Q. What if my physician or healthcare provider does not want to follow my Advance Healthcare Directive?

Your physician or healthcare provider must tell you, or your Healthcare Agent, if they cannot in good conscience follow your wishes or if the policies of the institution prevent them from honoring your wishes. By law the physician or healthcare provider must help transfer you to another physician or healthcare provider willing to carry out your directives, if one exists.

Q. Can I change my Advance Healthcare Directive?

Yes! You can change your mind by telling your physicians at any time. You can write a new Advance Healthcare Directive and replace all old copies with the new one. You should update your Advance Healthcare Directive whenever major life events occur (e.g. marriage, divorce, or death of a spouse), or if your goals change. You should discuss any changes with your Healthcare Agent, your physician, as well as family members and loved ones.

If your wishes about donating organs, eyes, hands, facial tissue, limbs, or other body parts change, tell your physician and write a new Advance Healthcare Directive to replace your old one. If you do not wish to donate your hands, facial tissue or limbs, it is important to make that clear in your Advance Healthcare Directive.

Q. What should I do with my completed Advance Healthcare Directive?

You should give a copy of your Advance Healthcare Directive to your Healthcare Agent, to your alternative Healthcare Agents and to your physician, and you should discuss it with them. Tell your family that you have written this document and discuss it with them and with others, such as your attorney or religious advisor. Keep a copy of your Advance Healthcare Directive in an accessible but secure place. Note that a copy kept in a safe deposit box may not be accessible when needed.

Q. What if I fill out an Advance Healthcare Directive in one state and I am hospitalized in a different state?

Legal requirements vary from state to state. Your Advance Healthcare Directive helps your doctors understand your wishes no matter where you are. If you spend a lot of time in another state you might consider consulting an attorney in that state to make sure that your wishes will be honored in that state.

Q. Who can I contact for additional information?

You can contact: Allegheny County Bar Association: 412-261-6161
Allegheny County Medical Society: 412-321-5030