

Making Choices[®]

Planning in Advance for Future Healthcare Choices

Information Card for Healthcare Agents



You have been chosen by _____ to be a healthcare agent. The following information explains what it means to be a healthcare agent and will help you prepare for this important role.

What is a healthcare agent?

A healthcare agent is a person chosen by a loved one, family member, or friend to make healthcare decisions, including end-of-life decisions, in the event a person is unable to make his or her own decisions. In most states, a doctor determines if a person is unable to make his or her own decisions.

What does it mean to be a healthcare agent?

Being a healthcare agent means you may need to make healthcare decisions for someone who cannot think or speak for himself or herself. This is a very important role. Ask questions if you are unclear about your responsibilities as a healthcare agent.

The person who has chosen you is expecting that you will make the decisions that he or she would make if able. He or she values and trusts you to do the right thing.

You should be able to answer “Yes” to the following questions:

Am I willing to take this role and responsibility?

Do I know what the person would want for future medical care?

Can I make the decisions they would want me to make, even if I disagree with the decisions?

Am I able to make difficult medical decisions under stressful situations?

If you answer “No” to any of these questions, you should talk about your concerns with the person who chose you.

As a healthcare agent, you may need to make decisions about

- medical care and services, such as tests, medicine, and surgery
- discontinuing treatment based on the person’s instructions or what is in the person’s best interest
- releasing medical records
- which organization and healthcare professional should provide care

Things you can do to prepare yourself to be a healthcare agent

Take time to talk with the person who chose you as their healthcare agent so you understand their preferences for future medical care, including the end-of-life care.

The person who chose you as their healthcare agent should provide you with answers to the following questions before you accept the role.

“What is important to you to live well?”

“When would life not be worth living?”

“When would you want doctors to stop treatments that keep you alive?”

“How would you describe a peaceful death?”

The following statements often mean different things to different people. Ask the person who chose you as their healthcare agent to explain what each one means to him or her. This is very important. Write down the answers and read them back to make sure you both have a clear understanding.

“I just want to die with dignity.”

“Don’t keep me alive if I’m a vegetable.”

“Just make me comfortable.”

Some people want their healthcare agent to follow their stated preferences strictly and others want their agent to be free to decide based on what seems to be the best decision at the time. Ask the person: “Is it more important to you that I follow your instructions about your future medical treatment strictly no matter what, or should I do what seems best at the time?”

Try to go with the person to a doctor’s appointment. You and the doctor can get to know each other and you can ask questions regarding the person’s health condition and choices they make about their care.

Some doctors, nurses, social workers, chaplains, and other healthcare professionals are trained to help people plan for future healthcare. They can also help you learn more about being a healthcare agent.

Remember: While talking about these issues with a loved one may be uncomfortable, the more you understand the better prepared you will be if you are called on to make healthcare decisions for your loved one. Think about being prepared as an act of love. If you accept the role of healthcare agent, commit to it. Trust yourself to do what is right. The person who chose you trusts that you can – and will.

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MC520-E_HlthAgntCrd_v12.19

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