

Talk to your family about what matters most

By Mary Abrahams

If you were terminally ill, under what circumstances would you want life-sustaining treatment, such as a feeding tube or ventilator for breathing? If you were unable to communicate your wishes, who would you want to speak for you?

There are good reasons to answer those important, but difficult, questions before any emergency arises. Adults can control what care they would receive by completing documents called advance care directives. To ensure your directive is followed, it is best to tell family members your wishes and let them know you have an advance healthcare directive document.

We are approaching the holidays when families often gather. Consider using these opportunities to talk to your loved ones about what matters most to you. Advance healthcare directives might seem like an odd topic for holiday discussion. However, letting your family know your plans and wishes can relieve them of uncertainty and difficult choices in the future.

Don't assume that your closest relatives are aware of your choices for end-of-life healthcare. If you have not had the conversation, they may not know.

Important steps in advance planning include:

- Choosing a healthcare proxy – a trusted person, such as a spouse, adult child, friend or faith leader, to make healthcare decisions on your behalf if you cannot do so. Everyone over age 18 needs a proxy. Up until then, a parent or legal guardian is automatically considered a child's proxy.
- Asking the person you want to be your proxy if they are willing to do that for you.
- Getting advance directive forms from your healthcare provider or from the Montana Department of Justice website, dojmt.gov. Search for "advance health care directive".
- Naming your choice of healthcare proxy in a legal document, such as a living will or other advance care directive.
- Stating in your directive what types of medical treatment you want if you become terminally ill and unable to communicate your wishes.
- Stating what types of treatment you don't want.

Once an advance healthcare directive is completed, it can still be changed if you want to change it.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends giving copies of advance care planning documents to your healthcare proxy, your healthcare providers, your hospital and anyone you think should have the information.

Consider creating digital duplicates of hard copy documents. Save them in a password-protected format to a flash or external hard drive or a secure cloud service.

As time passes, your advance directive documents may need to be updated. The CDC suggests periodic proofreading for errors and outdated information to save yourself and others time, frustration and added worry in an emergency.

By creating an advance directive, you gain control over healthcare decisions, even if you later are unable to speak for yourself. Advance directives provide information to your healthcare team and comfort to your family. They won't have to guess or stress about what you would want.

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