



# Advance Care Planning: It's About the Conversation

## What is Advance Care Planning?

Advance care planning is a process of understanding, reflecting on and discussing future medical decisions, including end-of life preferences. It may include:

- **Understanding** your health care condition and treatment options.
- **Clarifying** your health care wishes and defining what “living well” means to you.
- **Weighing** your options about what types of care and treatment you would want or not want.
- **Choosing** a health care agent who can speak for you if you become injured or ill and unable to communicate, and deciding to complete an advance directive.
- **Communicating** your wishes and sharing any documents with your family, friends, clergy, advisors, physicians and other health care professionals.

## Advance Care Planning: How to Begin

### 1. Reflect on Your Values

*Who we are*, what we believe and what we value are all shaped by our own experiences. Religion, family traditions, jobs and friends affect us deeply. Reflecting on your experiences will help you clarify your beliefs. Ask yourself the following questions.

*Looking back...*Has anything happened in my past that shaped my feelings about medical treatment? What was positive about that? What do I wish had happened differently?  
*Here and now...*Do I have any significant health problems now? What kinds of things bring me so much joy that if a health problem prevented me from doing them, life would have little meaning?

*Tomorrow ...*If ill, do I understand my illness and the complications that may occur? What fears or worries do I have about how my health problems may affect me in the future? How would my health care decisions be made if I were unable to communicate?

### 2. Choose a Health Care Agent

An important part of planning is to appoint someone to make your health care decisions if you are injured or ill and unable to communicate.

Many people select a close family member, but you may choose anyone you think would best represent you. It's important to appoint at least one alternate person in case your first choice is unable or unwilling to represent you. You should appoint someone who:

- You can trust.
- Will accept this responsibility.
- Will follow the values and instructions you have discussed, including spiritual perspectives—even if they do not always agree with your choices.
- Can manage conflict and make decisions in sometimes difficult situations.

### **3. Consider Future Decisions**

Providing instructions for future health care decisions may seem like an impossible task. Can anyone plan for all the possibilities? No, but you do not have to.

You need to plan for situations where you become unexpectedly incapable of making your own decisions and have little or no chance for recovery. Such a situation might arise because of an accident, a stroke or a slowly progressive disease.

Clarifying your goals for care will help guide your health care agent and your health care professionals. Discuss these questions with them:

- When would it make sense to continue certain treatments in an effort to prolong life or seek recovery?
- When would it make sense to stop or withhold certain treatments and accept death when it comes?
- Under all circumstances, what kind of comfort would you want, including medical, spiritual and environmental options?

### **4. Complete an Advance Directive**

Based on your understanding, reflection and discussions, you can complete your clear and informed written advance directive.

- Give copies to your health care agent and your health care professionals.
- Talk to the rest of your family and close friends. Tell them who your health care agent is and what your wishes are.
- Keep a copy of your advance directive where it can be easily found and accessed, not in a safe deposit box or locked drawer.
- Take a copy with you if you go to a hospital or nursing home and ask for it to be put in your medical record.
- Review the document regularly. Remember, advance care planning is a process, not a one-time event. Wishes may change as your circumstances change.

#### **Important Facts**

Eighty percent of people say that if seriously ill, they would want to talk to their doctor about end-of-life care, but only 7% report having had an end-of-life conversation with their doctor.

Eighty-two percent of people say it's important to put their wishes in writing; 23 percent have actually done it.

Seventy-five percent of physicians whose patient had an advance directive were not aware that it existed.

Ninety-nine percent of physicians surveyed said it is important that health care providers have conversations about advance care planning with their patients.