

MAKING YOUR WISHES KNOWN

Recent studies indicate the single most powerful thing a person can do to improve the chance for a peaceful death is --- simply and courageously --- to talk about it. Effective communication with those who will be called upon to make decisions on your behalf is key to the likelihood that your wishes are carried out. It is never too early to get started.

When to have the Conversation

- DEATH is the elephant in the room. Even if no one mentions it, everyone knows it's there.
- How do you begin to talk about death? One approach is to purposefully create time to initiate the conversation. You might choose a family gathering on a holiday or at a special event such as your birthday. Or you might decide it would be better to initiate individual conversations with family members before having a group discussion.
- Another approach is to stay alert to spontaneous opportunities. Introduce the topic of end-of-life wishes when a particular subject arises, such as concerns about losing various aspects of your independence.

What to Talk About

- Your discussions should include how you would want to be treated in a variety of situations, as identified in your Personal Declaration of Values. Those close to you need to know what you would want if you were living with physical pain, disability, terminal illness, dementia or debilitating chronic illness.
- Consider who you want to advocate for you if you can no longer make your own decisions, and let people know who those agents will be.
- Be sure to ask each person you talk with if they are comfortable with your choices.

Conversation Starters

With your family:

- "It's important for me to be able to talk honestly with you about my concerns and wishes if I ever become seriously ill or unable to speak for myself..."
- "I need to talk with you about my advance directives ..."

- “I want to make sure that I get the best care possible, and the type of care that I want, so there are things we should talk about...”
- “I want to make it as easy as possible for my family to make medical decisions on my behalf if I ever become incapable of communicating my wishes...”
- “If you are ever in a position where you need to make health care decisions for me, it will be most helpful to you if you know what I really want...”

With your health care provider:

- “At the end of life, medical treatments may cause additional suffering along with the hope of prolonging life. My feelings about that are... ”
- “I love so much about life – being active and independent, having my mental faculties, enjoying my family. If none of that were possible anymore, “I’d want ...”
- “I have some concerns about end-of-life decisions. I want to be sure you will fully explain all procedures, treatments, alternatives and risks to me and my agent...”

Conclusion

It is important to think through your concerns and how they affect your wishes for end-of-life care, and to communicate those wishes to your health care provider and your loved ones. If they ever have to make decisions on your behalf, that difficult task will be made easier by being confident that they know your wishes. You relieve them of the burden of guessing what you would choose when you make your preferences clear to everyone well ahead of a medical crisis. Other people who need to know about your end-of-life concerns and wishes could include other family members, friends, other medical caregivers, your attorney, and clergy.

Talk with your family and personal health care provider about specific treatments that could come up, particularly regarding any current medical condition. In conversation with your health care provider or prospective agents, you may realize they do not support your wishes. You have the right to change health care providers, and to name health care agents who do support your desires.

If you anticipate that some family members may strongly disagree with your choices, communicate directly (verbally and in writing) with those you anticipate will not support your wishes, and be clear that you do not want them involved in decision making and why.