People who are sick enough to be coming to the end of life face many decisions about their medical care. When people can’t make important decisions because of illnesses like Alzheimer disease, others must speak for them.

If you need to speak for someone else ... are you ready for that role?
Your Role if You Need to Make Medical Decisions for a Loved One

Your goal should be to try to meet your loved one’s wishes and goals for care. This will probably take working together with the doctor and with those close to the person. It will take some time to make the decisions. Be aware that state laws recognize different ways to make medical decisions for someone else.

Taking the First Steps

- Sit down with the doctor and get information about what is likely to happen.
- Ask the doctor to talk to you about the person’s suffering and quality of life.
- Talk to the doctor about what types of decisions you will need to make now and later.
- Find out what the different options are for care and what things you need to think about.
  - What are the benefits of different care options?
  - What are the burdens of different options?
  - What are the risks?
- Take time to think and talk about these things with other people important to your loved one.
- Try to find decisions that everybody can accept.
- Sometimes it helps to bring in another person, such as a clergy member or social worker.
- Ask often if the patient is being kept comfortable and how you can tell.

Some Helpful Words

Living wills and durable powers of attorney are written advance directives and follow state law. Some states combine both in one document.

Living Wills
Living wills let people write down what medical care they do and do not want.

Durable Powers of Attorney
Durable powers of attorney for health care let people appoint someone to speak for them (called a proxy or agent).

Conversations with others, especially the doctor—who can write wishes in the medical record—is another way to plan.

What Would Your Loved One Have Wanted?

Did your loved one plan for a time when she or he would not be able to speak for her/himself? Are her or his wishes written down? Did he or she use a living will or durable power of attorney for health care? Do you have these papers or know where to find them?

If there is no living will or no one has been appointed proxy, many states have laws that say which family member (spouse, adult child, etc.) can speak for the patient.

Without those laws, doctors will usually turn to a close family member for decision-making. But it is still important for people to be talking together to reach good decisions.

Choices if You Need to Make Medical Decisions for a Loved One

Do you know what your loved one’s wishes are? Can you tell the doctor about his or her values? This will help the doctor understand and respect what he or she would have wanted.

Do you know your loved one’s wishes about:

- Calling 911?
- Going to the hospital?
- A do-not-resuscitate order refusing CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) if his or her heart and/or breathing stops?
- Tubes for artificial feeding if he or she can no longer eat and drink?
- Respirators (breathing machines)?

If your loved one is in a nursing home, do you know the nursing home’s policy on hospitalization, do-not-resuscitate orders, and tubes for artificial feeding?