

Facts About Choosing and Being a Healthcare Proxy or Surrogate Decision Maker

A healthcare proxy, or surrogate decision maker, is someone a patient chooses to make medical decisions in the event the patient is unable to make decisions for them self. The surrogate should be someone the patient trusts, and someone who understands the patient's medical situation and medical preferences.

How does someone begin the process of selecting a healthcare surrogate?

Things to think about:

- Are there people you know who share your cultural and religious or spiritual views?
- Are these people good listeners and communicators?
- Are you comfortable talking to these individuals about your personal health?
- Are they willing to learn as much as possible about your wishes, goals and values for medical care?
- Are they comfortable asking your physicians and family questions, even if the conversations are difficult?
- Can they stay calm in a crisis?

What are the responsibilities of a healthcare surrogate?

The healthcare surrogate should know and understand your current health status and expected outlook (prognosis). They may need to be assertive and ask questions. Consider asking your surrogate to come to doctor visits with you to get to know your doctors. Your healthcare surrogate must clearly understand the goals of your treatment plan, including the benefits and burdens of treatment and no treatment. There may be unexpected events that require quick decision making. The surrogate may need to make choices about your care in situations you weren't expecting.

The healthcare surrogate knows the patient's wishes regarding medical treatments.

What does my healthcare surrogate need to know?

You should communicate to your surrogate what it means for you to have acceptable quality of life. Discuss what medical treatments you do and do not want. Because your views may change, plan to have a series of conversations over time. It may be hard to anticipate every healthcare situation possible but speaking openly helps to clarify what you want and gives your surrogate confidence that they are doing the right thing for you. Asking the following questions can help start the process:

1. What medical treatments do you want to receive or refuse?
2. Would you want to have a feeding tube or receive intravenous (IV) feeding to maintain nutrition (food) and hydration (fluid)?
3. If your heart stops beating, is Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) something you would want? Do you clearly understand what CPR means and what your outcome may be if you have CPR?
4. How do you feel about being on a machine that breathes for you (artificial ventilation)?
5. If you develop a serious infection, would you want to receive antibiotics?
6. Would you want these treatments on a limited time trial basis? What changes in your health situation would make you want to continue or stop treatment?

What does healthcare advocacy in action look like?

The healthcare surrogate is the patient's advocate and knows the patient's wishes regarding medical treatments. They can make decisions in situations the patient might not have thought about, putting the patient's best interests first. The surrogate can speak with physicians about the patient's changing medical condition. Most importantly, the surrogate can take steps to ensure that the patient's medical choices are honored.

References

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (2017). Advance Care Planning. Retrieved from <https://www.nhpco.org/advance-care-planning>
National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (No Date). Selecting Your Healthcare Agent. Retrieved from <http://www.caringinfo.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3286>
National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization: CaringInfo (2016). Communicating End of Life Wishes. Retrieved from http://www.caringinfo.org/files/public/brochures/Communicating_EOL_Wishes.pdf