

Making Decisions about Medical Care at the End of Life

Many patients feel overwhelmed when making decisions about medical care at the end of life. They wonder if they have asked the right questions, have heard the answers clearly, know what to expect and understand their options.

The following ideas may help as you try to get through this emotional and stressful time.

Understand what is happening

You need information from your doctor about what is going on now and what you can expect in the future. Ask questions about anything that is unclear.

When deciding whether to begin or continue a treatment, you may want to ask:

What can I expect this treatment to do for me?

What are the risks and benefits? What are some other options?

Will I need to make special arrangements or pay any special costs for the treatment?

What are the chances that this treatment will work for me?

How and when will I know that it is working?

Does this treatment fit with my goals for the end of life?

Your doctor, nurses, social worker and chaplain can help you think about these questions. In some cases, it may help to bring the family together to decide what to do.

Know your rights and responsibilities

You have the right to agree to, refuse or stop any treatment. It is important to understand how and why you are being treated, what your options are and what the risks and benefits are.

Share your wishes

You may want to choose someone to speak for you if you become unable to speak for yourself. This person should be someone who understands your values and goals and can describe your wishes if you cannot.

Be sure the person you choose is willing to do this for you. Then, tell your family and health care team who this person is.

You may also want to write out a health care directive or living will. This will include your wishes for treatment and the name of the person who will speak for you. Ask a social worker for more information.