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Plan for Peace of Mind: The Importance of Advance Directives

Do you ever think about what would happen if you could not speak for yourself in a medical emergency? Who would you want to make your decision for you? Who knows your wishes concerning life-sustaining technology? Advance Directives are legal documents that allow you to voice your future healthcare wishes through a designated person you appoint.

Unfortunately, only one in four Americans over 18 has these documents. Many people believe this type of planning is only for older adults; however, anyone at any age can experience an accident, a serious disease, or surgery that leaves them incapacitated and unable to make their own health care decisions.

K-State Extension has a publication containing all the documents you need to complete your advance directives. The documents are easy to complete and won't take too much time. Three types of advance directives are available: a durable power of attorney for health care, a living will, and a pre-hospital do-not-resuscitate order.

The durable power of attorney for health care allows you to select an agent. The person you appoint will be able to make health care decisions on your behalf if you are temporarily or permanently incapacitated due to illness or injury. This appointed person has the authority to make treatment decisions. This person, however, cannot revoke any previously existing documents regarding your wishes, such as a living will.

A living will is a document that allows you to write your wishes for end-of-life care if you cannot speak for yourself. It differs from the power of attorney for health care in that it does not appoint a person to speak for you; it states in writing what type of care you want at the end of your life. The living will addresses life-sustaining care, such as using a ventilator, artificial nutrition, and hydration.

The do not resuscitate (DNR) order is a legal document that allows adults to express their wishes not to have resuscitation attempted should they stop breathing or their heart stop beating. Having a DNR means that you do not want to have cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) attempted. The decision to have a DNR should not be taken lightly. Generally, you, your physician, and a witness will have to sign this document. You can revoke the DNR anytime by signing the signature line "I hereby revoke the above declaration."

An advance directive offers peace of mind by knowing your wishes will be honored. If you would like more information about advance healthcare directives, contact Teresa Hatfield at thatfield@ksu.edu or call 785-364-4125.