

Role of the Healthcare Agent for COVID-19

This guide will help you learn about the role and responsibilities of the healthcare agent (or legally appointed healthcare representative).

During so much uncertainty amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the one thing all adults can prepare for is to control who speaks for them if they become unable to speak for themselves. The best time to plan for future healthcare choices is *before* a medical crisis occurs. Proactive care planning is a process that involves thinking and talking about complex and sensitive issues. If you have been chosen to be someone's healthcare agent, how do you know what your loved one would want if they became very ill with the COVID infection? It is more important than ever that you talk with your loved one to learn and understand what matters most to them in the event that the person becomes seriously ill.

What is a healthcare agent?

A healthcare agent is a person who makes healthcare decisions for someone who cannot make their own decisions. An agent may be needed if the person is very sick, injured, or is nearing the end of their life. All adults are encouraged to choose a healthcare agent *before* a medical crisis.

When does a healthcare agent start to make decisions?

Every adult has the right to make their own decisions until it is determined that the person is not able to make their own decisions. An agent makes decisions *only* if the person is not able to communicate their own decisions and deemed incapacitated. Every state has their own laws as to who has to assess and agree that the person lacks decisional capacity (e.g., two doctors; or a doctor and a psychologist, physician assistant, or advanced practitioner).

Participating in proactive care planning will help prepare healthcare agents for a possible decision-making role for someone who is at greater risk for COVID-19 complications and help advocate for care that aligns with the person's goals, values, beliefs, and preferences for medical care.

How do I know if I am ready to be a healthcare agent?

You should be able to answer "yes" to all of these questions:

- Am I willing to discuss what matters most to the individual?
- Can I follow the person's decisions and preferences even if I do not agree with them?
- Am I able to make decisions in difficult moments?

Start the conversation by talking about what matters most to the person

There's no way to tell when a sudden illness, such as COVID-19, could leave your loved one unable to make their own decisions. You may need to suddenly make complex decisions about treatment options (such as hospitalization, IV fluids, and mechanical ventilation) and where the person might receive care, such as at home, in a hospital, or care facility. The healthcare team caring for your loved one can help you have a conversation about the possible complications of COVID-19 and potential treatment decisions that may be needed if the person becomes seriously ill by discussing questions such as:

- *“What is most important for your loved one to live well? For example, if your loved one were having a good day, what would happen on that day?”*
- *“What personal, cultural, or spiritual beliefs, if any, does your loved one have that would impact their care?”*
- *“What does your loved one want if they became very ill? For example, would your loved one want their medical care to focus on living longer, maintaining current health, or comfort care?”*
- *“What worries you and your loved one most about the situation? What fears does your loved one have?”*
- *“What else would your loved one want you to know about what is important to them at this time?”*
- *“What questions, fears, or concerns do you (healthcare agent) have about the possibility of having to make complex medical decisions?”*

Making decisions requires that you be willing to ask questions and learn about the complications of COVID-19 and hearing your loved one's perspective about the benefits and burdens of treatment in the context of the person's current medical condition, and then advocating for their priorities with their doctor and healthcare team, should your loved one be unable to speak.

The healthcare team can help you and your loved one prepare for a possible decision-making role should it become necessary due to complications from COVID-19 infection. Knowing that you will advocate for the medical care that fits with your loved one's goals, values, and preferences will be a great comfort to you both.

Make an appointment (telephonic, telemedicine, video conference, or in-person, as appropriate) to talk with a clinician (e.g., Facilitator, nurse, social worker, chaplain, physician, advanced practitioner) to have this important conversation.