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How to Choose a Health Care Proxy

Who would you want to make medical decisions for you if you were unable to make them for yourself?

A health care proxy (also called a health care agent or Power of Attorney for Health Care)3g (en-US)93cID 193lc /TT2 32 53en-US



Step 1

WHEN is the right time to choose your proxy?

As we say in The Conversation Project,

Up until age 18, your parent or legal guardian usually serves as your proxy. But once you turn 18, your parents are no longer your automatic health care proxy. So everyone age 18 or older should complete a health care proxy form — even if they're perfectly healthy. If you're over 18 and haven't yet chosen a proxy, the time is now!

EARLY

When you come of age — at age 18.

OFTEN

It's good to review your choice of proxy at the start of each decade — when you turn 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70...

AT A MAJOR LIFE EVENT

- If you go to college
- If you get married, divorced, or widowed
- If you have children
- If you become eligible for Medicare
- If you are going on a major trip
- If you are newly diagnosed with a serious illness

Frequently Asked Questions

What if I want to choose more than one person to be my proxy?

It's generally advisable not to name two people to serve as co-proxies — because if they disagree, the situation can become complicated.

The rules for this vary: some states and countries allow you to name co-proxies, and some states and countries limit you to one at a time.

In all states and countries, you can name an alternate proxy if your primary proxy is unable to serve. It's a good idea to name an alternate proxy.

What if I don't want to pick a family member?

Sometimes people feel obligated to choose their spouse, or their adult child — even when they don't think that person is the best choice to follow their wishes. It's okay if you want to choose someone who's not a family member — even if your family pushes back at first.

NOTE: Be sure you tell your family beforehand who your proxy is.

You can say,

without the emotional conflict my family members may face. Even if it creates tension, it is better for them to find out who your proxy is before a medical crisis.

FINDING THE RIGHT PROXY

A woman who lives in Hawaii wanted to choose a proxy. She started by asking her husband. His answer, "I could never unhook you from anything. I will hold your hand for 20 years even if you're not responsive."

Next, the woman asked her son. His answer, "I got it, Mom. I know you don't want any extreme measures to save your life. I'll never let anyone hook you up."

Finally, she asked her daughter. The daughter answered, "I hear what's for recovery."

? Are there any rules about who CANNOT legally be my proxy?

Yes. The rules can vary between states and countries, but here are some examples of a few US-based restrictions on who you can choose to be your proxy:

- You may not choose someone under age 18 (in the United States, Alabama and Nebraska, under 19).
- If you're a patient in a health care facility, you may not choose an employee of that facility (unless the person is a relative).
- You may not choose a member of your current health care team (your doctor, nurse, etc.).
- Again, be sure to check your states and countries rules.

? What if I want to change my proxy?

Sometimes people change their mind about who they want to be their proxy. Maybe the person they chose moved away, or the relationship changed — or for any reason, the person no longer feels like the right one for the job.

It's okay to change your proxy. If you do, be sure to fill out a new proxy form and tell your family and your health care team about the change.

You can just say,
that I've decided to change my proxy. Thank you so much, but I won't need you to take on this responsibility for me."

? What if I don't have someone I would like to be my proxy?

Someone may not come to mind immediately. Remember that your proxy doesn't have to be a family member. It could be a friend, a more distant relative, or someone at your place of worship.

Even if you don't appoint a person to be your health care proxy (your agent), it's a good idea to complete the proxy form (the advance directive), listing medical treatments that you would or would not want if you became terminally ill and unable to make your own decisions.

TWO PEOPLE CHOOSE ONE ANOTHER

*Two women attended a Conversation Starter Kit workshop at their church, at
needed to have a health care proxy. But she was single, had no children, and
she felt she couldn't rely on to be her health care proxy and had put off
service. One day, their pastor asked them if they might consider being health*

? Is a health care proxy the same as an advance directive?

"Advance directive" is a general term for any written health care instruction specifying your wishes or naming a proxy. It encompasses both health care proxy forms and living wills. It states which medical treatments you want or don't want if you are no longer able to make decisions on your own (for example, if you're in a coma).



How to Be a Health Care Proxy

- ✓ Being a good proxy means speaking for the person when they're unable to speak for themselves.

Being a proxy is not about what YOU want; it is about what the person you're speaking for wants. In any situation where you have to act as a proxy, ask yourself, *decision right now, what would they say?"*

A SISTER TO HER BROTHER

"This was Mom's choice. Now we have to be her voice."

- ✓ Being a good proxy is about doing your best.

Being a good proxy isn't about being perfect — it is about doing the best you can. Sometimes it's not possible to follow the person's wishes: maybe they said they want to be home, but it is not physically, financially, or safely possible to keep them there. In that case, just do the best you can. *"The best you can do is the best you can do."*

A LETTER FROM A MOTHER TO HER FAMILY

"If you are faced with a decision that you're not ready for, it's okay. I'll try to let you know what I would want for various circumstances, but if you come to something we haven't anticipated, it's okay. And if you come to a decision point and what you decide results in my death, it's okay. I will die because of my illness or my body failing or whatever. You do not need to

✓ What if someone asks you to be their proxy, but you are not comfortable saying yes?

It's okay to decline the invitation. For whatever reason, you might not feel you can take it on. Maybe you just are not comfortable with the person's preferences. Or maybe you feel like you could not bring yourself to make a decision that might shorten their life. Or maybe you are just too overwhelmed to take on the responsibility.

If you are not comfortable saying yes, the best thing you can do is lovingly say no. Be honest. Say *"Thank you for asking me — I am honored. I just do not think I can do a good job being your proxy."*

What if it is not possible to follow a person's wishes?

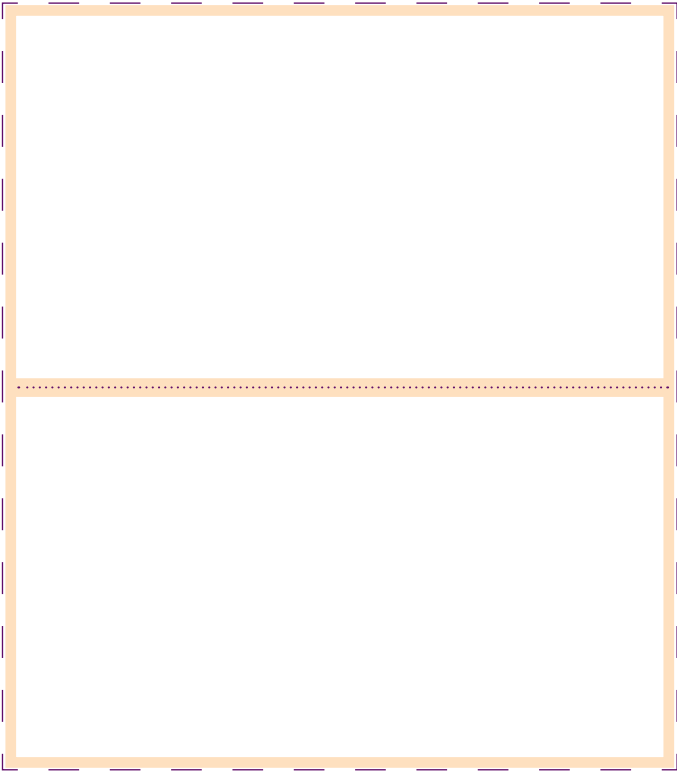
One of the hardest situations is when a loved one has clearly stated a wish, but it isn't a feasible option — medically, financially, or because of limited family support. Perhaps the most common example of this is when a loved one has expressed a clear wish to die at home, but it's not a feasible option.

There are no easy answers. But one thing you can do is find out what matters most to the person about "home" — and then do your best to come as close as possible. That might mean bringing in family pictures. Or a favorite piece of clothing or a favorite blanket. Or playing

- Make sure you understand your legal responsibilities as a proxy.



Cut out card, fold, and laminate for safe keeping.



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