

How to make end-of-life decisions

Use this guide if you are called upon to make treatment decisions for a loved one at the end of life who has no advance directive and has not discussed preferences with you or anyone else.

Step 1: Gather medical information with these questions:

- What is the diagnosis and what complications have occurred?
- How effective is the recommended treatment for a patient of this age and medical condition?
- What are the chances for recovery or improvement with this treatment?
- What side effects or additional suffering could be caused by the treatment?
- What will happen if the treatment is stopped and the condition follows its natural course?
- What would you do if this were your loved one?

Step 2: Get expert advice

- Request a palliative care consultation
- Ask the palliative team to facilitate a family discussion about the questions listed above

Step 3: Remember past conversations

- Think back to any past discussions when your loved one might have mentioned thoughts and feelings about the end of life
- How did he or she respond to the death of a loved one in the past?

Step 4: Consider the statistics

- Most people want to die at home without aggressive care
- Most people feel it is acceptable to stop treatment when illness is incurable

Step 5: Ask your loved one

- Sit quietly with your loved one and ask for guidance about the decision that must be made
- Visualize her or him sitting with you and responding to your question
- “Listen” for an answer or any intuitive sense about how your loved one wants to proceed

Step 6: Be gentle with yourself

- It is normal to feel doubt and guilt after making such a difficult decision
- Know that you’ve done the best you can and acted from love
- Forgive yourself and let go of any blame