



VA | Defining
HEALTH CARE | **EXCELLENCE**
in the 21st Century

Setting Health Care Goals

A Guide for People with Health Problems



National Center for
ETHICS
in Health Care

What is important to you as you think about the future?

Different people want different things. What matters to you should guide decisions about your treatment. Talk with your health care team about what is important and what you want to accomplish. Your health care team can help you decide which treatments and services would best help you reach your health care goals.



What are goals of care?

Goals of care are what you would like to achieve through your health care.

Here are some examples:

- Easing symptoms to make you feel more comfortable
- Staying or becoming independent
- Curing an illness, or improving quality of life when cure is not possible
- Prolonging your life
- Supporting loved ones or caregivers
- Meeting a specific personal goal – like attending a wedding or taking a trip



What should I talk about with my health care team?

- Your medical condition – what it is and how it might change
- What is important to you – in your life, and about your health care
- Your health care goals – what you want your health care to accomplish or avoid
- Which services and treatments would likely help you reach your goals, and which ones would or would not be acceptable to you
- Your health care surrogate – the person you want to make health care decisions for you if you could no longer make decisions for yourself



Who should be part of the conversation?

- You
- Your health care provider or team
- Your health care surrogate
- Any other people you want to include



What can I do to get ready for a conversation about my health care goals?

- Think about what is important to you
- Think about your goals for your health care
- Invite your health care decision maker – and others, if you would like – to be there with you for the conversation
- Bring your advance directive, if you have one, when you meet with your health care provider or team

A message for people who make health care decisions for someone who is too sick to make decisions on their own

When a person is too sick to make decisions, the health care team relies on someone close to that person to help them understand what the person would want. If you are responsible for making health care decisions for someone else, your job is to tell the health care team *what that person would say* about their goals and the type of care they would accept. You should make decisions that match that person's *values, beliefs, and preferences*. If you don't know what those are, you should make decisions that are in that person's *best interests*.

How do I know what the person who is ill would decide?

Think about what you know about them. What would they say is important to them now? What did they say about other people who were in similar situations? What did they say they would want, or what they would want to avoid? They might have completed an advance directive or life-sustaining treatment plan sometime in the past. Those documents can help you understand what their goals and preferences would be now.

Making health care decisions for others, even when you know what they want, can be stressful. The health care team can help you by providing information and support.



Information About Life-Sustaining Treatments

What are life-sustaining treatments?

Life-sustaining treatments are treatments that might help you live longer when you would be expected to die otherwise. Examples of these treatments are feeding tubes, mechanical ventilation, dialysis, and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

Life-sustaining treatments might or might not work to help you live longer. Whether they are likely to work depends on your medical problems. They do not cure disease or chronic illness. Sometimes they are used for a short time to get a person through a health crisis, like when a chronic illness suddenly gets worse or while a person is being treated for a sudden serious illness. They can help some people with certain medical conditions live for a long time. Sometimes they cause complications or discomfort.

Some people would want life-sustaining treatments, and others would not. Some people might want one life-sustaining treatment but not others. Decisions about life-sustaining treatments should be made based on your goals and preferences.



Your health care team can give you more information about life-sustaining treatments. Talk with them about how these treatments relate to your health care goals.

Tell Us What Matters to You

Talk with people you trust and with your health care team about what is important to you, and what you want to accomplish through your health care. Based on your priorities, your health care provider can help you decide which services and treatments would – and would not – be likely to help you reach your goals.



OUR COMMITMENT

Understanding what is important to Veterans and providing health care that helps them reach their goals

National Center for Ethics in Health Care, Veterans Health Administration.

Acknowledgements: Kenneth Berkowitz, Shaida Talebreza Brandon, Susan Crowley, Jason Dominitz, Sharon Douglas, Jill Lowery, Ann O'Hare, Shirley Paski, Robert Pearlman, Virginia Ashby Sharpe, Steve Tokar, and members of the Life-Sustaining Treatment Advisory Boards of Lovell Federal Health Care Center, VA Black Hills Health Care System, VA Salt Lake City Health Care System, and William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital.

Updated: June 2016.

