



# Preparing to be a Health Care Proxy

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## **I have been asked by someone to be a Health Care Proxy. What does this mean?**

It means that the person wants you to be the one who will make decisions about medical care, if he or she becomes unable to because of sudden illness or injury.

## **Why would someone ask me to be his or her Health Care Proxy?**

- He or she may have asked you because the person feels you know him or her well. The person may feel that you understand and respect his or her values.
- The person trusts that you will make the medical choices he or she would make.
- The person trusts that you will make those choices even if you, other loved ones, or health care providers disagree with them.

## **What types of decisions would I have to make?**

You could be asked to make decisions about tests, surgeries, and about whether to start or stop treatments. This will include making life or death choices.

Acting as a Health Care Proxy is a very important role. Before accepting it, be sure that you are comfortable with it.

## **How can I be sure that I can be a Health Care Proxy?**

You need to think carefully about the responsibility.

To be a Health Care Proxy you must be able and willing to accept the role and the responsibilities that come with it.

Ask yourself these questions:

1. Can I be available to meet and talk with health care providers as needed?
2. Am I able to make difficult decisions under stressful conditions?
3. Do I know about the person's choices for medical treatments in different situations? Am I willing to spend time with him or her to make sure I know, or understand what they are?
4. Do I know the person well enough to know what he or she values in life and what gives life meaning? Am I willing to spend time with the person to make sure I know his or her values?

If you are not comfortable with any of these responsibilities you should talk to the person about whether you are the right choice to be their Health Care Proxy.

**If you feel that you can meet these responsibilities and are willing to be the Health Care Proxy, then prepare for the role by taking the steps on the next page.**

A statement that provides direction about a person's health care choices and/or appoints a Health Care Proxy is an *advance directive*. In Massachusetts the legal document used to record this is called a *Health Care Proxy* form.

Although it is optional to complete this document or to write down health care choices, the staff of Brigham and Women's Hospital encourages every adult to begin this process when healthy, before a crisis occurs.

### **Steps to prepare to be a Health Care Proxy:**

**1. Talk with the person about his or her health and medical preferences.**

Try to understand any medical conditions the person might face in the future. Ask if the person would like you to go to doctor's appointments.

Asking the person about past experiences and medical decisions of their own, friends' or family's, can help start the conversation. Asking the person to write their thoughts can also help.

**2. Ask the person about treatments he or she would choose for him or her self.**

For instance, would the person choose medical treatments to keep him or her alive even if he or she would never again be aware of who he or she was or of the surroundings?

**3. Talk with the person about their values and what gives meaning to life.**

Knowing the person's values and beliefs makes it easier to be a Health Care Proxy.

**4. Talk with the person about the importance of making these wishes known to others.**

To avoid confusion or conflict in the future, the person should share his or her wishes and expressed medical choices with family, loved ones, and with the health care team.

**5. Make sure that the person has completed a Health Care Proxy form and that you have a copy of it and of all other related documents.**

**If a family member, loved one, or health care provider has difficulty respecting the person's choices, you as the Health Care Proxy may consider consultation with the Brigham and Women's Hospital Ethics Consultation Service: 617-732-8590 or beeper number 18590.**

Health Care Proxy forms are available at BWH through  
the Care Coordination Department  
(617-732-6469)  
or online at

[www.brighamandwomens.org/ethics](http://www.brighamandwomens.org/ethics)