

Discussing Difficult Topics With Your Family and Your Doctor

Opening a family conversation around the difficult topic of advance care planning may prove challenging for those with serious illnesses and their family members. Storytelling can often be an effective way to open a conversation. Draw from personal experiences of a friend who has recently died, or from stories in the news about illness or funerals or other current events. You can also begin “what if” conversations: What if I become incapacitated? What if I cannot recognize family and friends or cannot relate to them? What if I can no longer breathe on my own? From there you can begin conversations that focus on your care preferences.

Questions to Begin the Conversation

- How do I define quality of life? What do phrases such as “medical intervention,” “life support” or “death with dignity” mean to me?
- What do I understand, and what questions do I have about my condition, prognosis and options for care?
- To whom do I want to communicate my wishes for my care if I am unable to do so?
- How important is it to maintain my independence? What resources are available if I need care?
- What would I want done -- or not done -- if could I no longer eat, drink, breathe, communicate, make decisions, take care of myself, take care of people I love or live independently?
- Where do I want to receive care? Where do I want to live out my final days -- at home, in a hospital, in a hospice or in a nursing home? What kind of care will I receive in each facility?
- What are my greatest hopes and greatest fears for the end of my life? What would be hardest for me to lose during the dying process?
- What cultural and spiritual values and practices are important to me? How do these influence my choices regarding end of life?

What to Discuss With Your Doctor

Although you will want to have these conversations with your family, it is just as important to have them with your doctor and other clinicians, too. There are some key issues to explore and discuss, both when you are healthy and also when you are sick with a worsening condition.

- Do you know what your course is likely to be and what complications are likely to arise?
- Do you know what kinds of treatment you are willing to undergo and which you would rather turn down?
- Does your doctor know how you feel? Does your doctor have any experience providing services in the home, and do you need a good hospice or home care program to help?