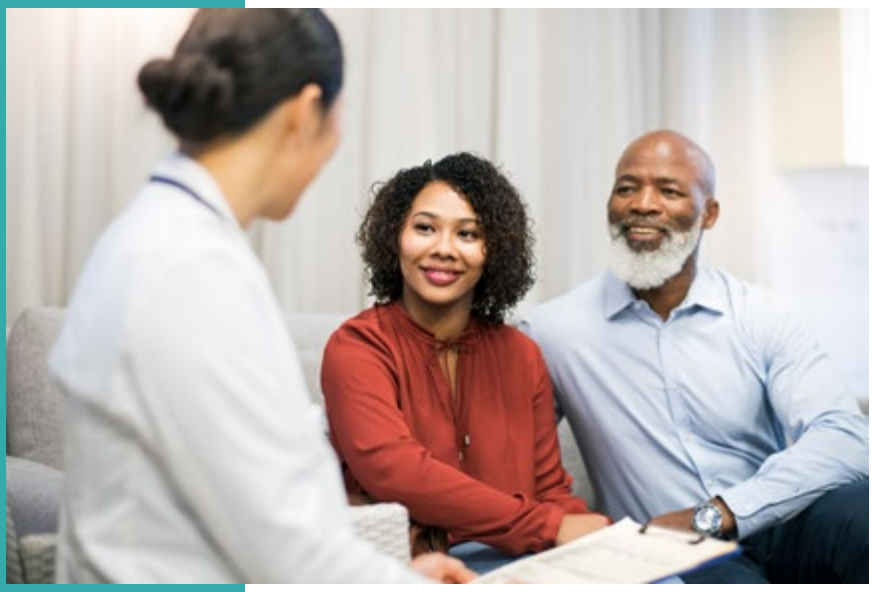
How To Talk With Loved Ones About Health Care Power of Attorney Decisions

SYNERGY HEALTHCARE

Conversations with a loved one about who could make medical decisions for them - in the event they are unable to speak for themselves - can be delicate. However, it is a critical need regardless of where they are in their health care journey. By encouraging your loved one to think about it now, they can do so with a clear head and with time to devote to important questions. With a little forethought and planning, these interactions can build trust while ensuring loved ones are prepared for the unexpected. Following are a few ways to engage constructively and compassionately.



Set the stage.

While it's important that loved ones, especially older adults, think through a health care power of attorney (HCPA) decision, you don't want to scare them. Emphasize that this is a proactive conversation, so they can be prepared should a situation arise where an HCPA is necessary.

Allow sufficient time for your loved one to talk to their doctor.

The idea of an HCPA can be disconcerting, so be sure to encourage your loved to discuss any questions with their doctor. Make sure they allocate enough time to process the information. Rushed conversations can cause confusion and undue stress, which may lead to avoidance or putting off the decision.

Focus on more than end-of-life scenarios.

Loved ones may not be aware of the diverse situations where they might need an HCPA. Consider mentioning examples that include temporary incidents, as well as permanent ones.

Talk about what happens if there is no power of attorney in place.

Loved ones should know how the doctor or hospital would handle cases where there is no HCPA documentation on record. Some states have decision-making laws that designate who should be consulted. This may include a spouse, parents or adult children.

Discuss what to look for in a health care power of attorney.

Since this person may be charged with making life-and-death choices on the loved ones behalf, the patient should have full trust in the individual. The person tapped to be the power of attorney must also feel comfortable making these types of decisions and respecting their loved ones wishes, even if those wishes differ from their own. Encourage loved ones to think carefully about who they choose, so they select someone who will best represent their interests if the situation should ever arise.

Explain how loved ones can take the next step.

There are many ways to complete HCPA documentation. Although consulting a lawyer can be helpful, loved ones can complete a form without legal counsel. State-specific forms are available from a variety of resources, including the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, your state hospice organization, public health departments, your local hospital, state bar associations and state aging offices.

Remind loved ones to use the forms specially created for your state because each state has different rules and regulations, and you want to ensure that the power of attorney will comply with your state's requirements. Loved ones may need to have a witness signature and get the forms notarized, depending on the state.

Encourage your loved one to share HCPA information with others.

Your loved one should keep their HCPA documentation in an easily accessible place. In addition, they should share the information with the person serving in this role, as well as other loved ones. Everyone involved with your loved one should know who the HCPA is and what the loved one is asking them to do.

Consider asking loved ones to share HCPA information with their doctor or hospital as well, so there won't be any confusion if critical decisions need to be made. You also may want to suggest that they tuck a note in their wallet that indicates the HCPA's name and contact information, as well as that of the loved one's lawyer if they have one.

Provide written information, if possible.

In addition to talking with your loved one, it is helpful to share written information about the process along with useful resources. Not only can this serve as a reminder of what you've discussed, but your loved one can share the information with others and use it to guide conversations as they make decisions.

Keep the lines of communication open.

Creating a power of attorney can introduce complex feelings and situations for loved ones. Encourage them to talk to their doctor about any questions they might have and point them to appropriate resources to take the next step.