

Living Wills and Do Not Resuscitate Orders

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A Living Will provides that life will not be artificially prolonged when there is no hope for recovery. To determine that there is no hope for recovery, the patient's physician and another consulting physician must determine that the patient has a terminal condition, an end-stage condition, or is in a persistent vegetative state, and there is no medical probability for recovery from the condition.

Sometimes people confuse it with a Do Not Resuscitate Order. While everybody who does not want to be kept alive artificially should sign a living will, not everybody should have a Do Not Resuscitate Order. Let's say a woman of 60 years old in reasonably good health chokes on food. The paramedics rush to the scene. At first, they do not know whether the person can be revived or what condition she will be in if she is revived. But even if they know she has a living will, they will likely try to revive her. And maybe after being revived, she would have many more years of a good life, able to enjoy her grandchildren, or traveling, or whatever she enjoys.

If a Do Not Resuscitate Order was in effect, she would not be resuscitated. Any accident that stopped the heart, even if the heart could have been easily started again, would mark the end of her life. When is a Do Not Resuscitate Order used? When a patient has a terminal or end-stage illness already, has advanced dementia or other condition that will likely end life soon, the doctor and the patient or the patient's designee

might sign a Do Not Resuscitate Order. If an accident, like choking on food, causes the end of life to happen earlier rather than later, the person will be allowed to die without heroic efforts. A person cannot create this document without the doctor's signature, and a doctor will not sign one unless there is no hope for the patient's recovery.

A Living Will should be signed by a person while they are competent and able to sign. A Do Not Resuscitate Order will be signed by a doctor and the patient's surrogate once it is determined that there is no hope for recovery.