
Time to Talk: Serious Illness Conversations

Serious or progressive chronic illnesses can be stressful for patients and their loved ones.

Earlier conversations with your health care provider about goals and values can ensure you receive the care you want, feel less distress, and avoid treatments that may cause harm.

Here's why:

Earlier conversations can support patient choices and avoid treatments that are potentially harmful.

While most Canadians want to avoid tests and treatments that may cause harm, particularly at the end of life, many end up getting them because their wishes are not known. Having a conversation with your health care provider is an important first step. Discussing your goals and values can help inform future health care choices, including what you may or may not want.

Harm from unnecessary tests and treatments.

Life-prolonging treatments like CPR and feeding tubes at the end of life can sometimes cause more harm than good. These treatments can sometimes prolong life, but do so at the expense of harming patients by potentially causing increased pain or discomfort and a loss of dignity.

Serious illness conversations should include discussions about risks, harms, and benefits of tests or treatments as well as quality of life considerations.



Time to talk.

It's important for Canadians and their health care providers to have these conversations. You can ask these four questions to help get the conversation started:

1. What is the understanding of my illness?
2. What matters to me most?
3. How much am I willing to go through for the sake of added time?
4. Do I have a health care decision-maker who knows my wishes if I am no longer able to speak for myself?

Ensuring that your wishes are known can improve your quality of care and inform future treatment decisions.

About Choosing Wisely Canada

Choosing Wisely Canada is the national voice for reducing unnecessary tests and treatments in health care. One of its important functions is to help clinicians and patients engage in conversations that lead to smart and effective care choices.

How this pamphlet was created:

This pamphlet was developed by Choosing Wisely Canada. It was reviewed by the Choosing Wisely Canada Serious Illness Workgroup, comprised of clinicians and patient and public advisors.

This pamphlet is for you to use when talking with your health care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this pamphlet is at your own risk.

Plan ahead. Advance Care Planning

Advance care planning helps you think about, talk about, and document wishes for health care in the event that you become incapable of consenting to or refusing medical treatments or other care.

Choose a loved one, family member or friend to communicate your wishes for you, should you become too unwell to make decisions for yourself. Talking to that person as well as your doctor and the rest of your family will help ensure your wishes are known and will help your loved ones make treatment decisions on your behalf.

Put your plans in writing.

Some people and their health care providers put off talking about their wishes and values for care. This puts you at risk of being too ill to guide your health care providers and may increase the uncertainty and burden that your loved ones feel.

Advance Care Planning Canada includes resources in your province and territory to start your plan:

www.advancecareplanning.ca