

# Information about POLST for Seriously Ill People and Their Caregivers

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The Illinois Department of Public Health POLST form helps seriously ill and frail-older people get the medical treatments they want, and avoid the medical treatments they do not want, if there is a medical emergency that makes speaking to health care professionals impossible.

In Illinois, “POLST” stands for Practitioner Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment. “Practitioner” simply means the medical professional who takes care of the patient. This person could be the doctor, advanced practice nurse or physician assistant.

POLST encourages people at high risk of a medical emergency to talk with a health care professional about what quality of life might be acceptable near the end of life. The conversation should include:

- **Patient’s diagnosis.** What disease(s) or medical conditions does the patient have?
- **Patient’s prognosis.** What is the likely course of the disease or condition? What will happen to the patient over time?
- **Treatment options.** What treatments are available to the patient? How do they help? What are the side effects?
- **Goals of care.** What is important to the patient? What makes a good quality of life?

After talking, the patient (or in some cases their surrogate/substitute decision maker) and his/her health care professional may be able to make informed, shared decisions about what treatments the patient wants, or does not want, and put them on a POLST form.

- A POLST form is a “portable medical order” which means that emergency personnel can follow the patient’s wishes during a medical emergency outside the hospital.
- A POLST form is different from an advance directive. Even when the patient has written down or told a family member what he/she wants, if the patient has a medical emergency, emergency personnel will do everything possible to try to save the patient’s life, including CPR and putting the patient on a breathing machine. They are required by law to do so, even though the chances of success may be low.
- Patients who are seriously ill or frail may not want an intensive level of treatment. The POLST form is a way for the patient to say “Yes, I want CPR and full treatment” or “No, I want to stay where I am and be made comfortable,” or something in the middle. The POLST form can be changed or voided at any time.  
**It is up to the patient what he/she wants the POLST form to say or if they want to have one at all.**

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*Thank you to National POLST for providing the educational content in this document*

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Illinois  
**POLST**  
Practitioner Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment  
A Participating Program of National POLST

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National  
**POLST**

## ***What is a POLST Form?***

A POLST form helps individuals with serious illness or frailty. It is designed to improve patient care by creating a portable medical order form (the POLST form) that records patients' treatment wishes so that emergency personnel know what treatments the patient wants.

## ***Is a POLST Form right for you or someone close to you?***

The POLST form is not for everyone; a POLST form is appropriate for patients who are at risk for a life threatening event because they have a serious life-limiting medical condition, which may include advanced frailty. For healthy patients, an advance directive is an appropriate tool for making future end-of-life care wishes known to loved ones.

## ***Why should a patient have a POLST Form?***

The POLST form puts in writing the medical order that helps give patients more control over receiving treatments they do want to receive—and avoiding treatments they do not want to receive—in the event they cannot speak for themselves during a medical emergency. POLST also helps patients clearly communicate their treatment wishes when they move between the hospital and a rehabilitation facility, nursing home or their own home.

## ***Is a POLST Form required?***

No. Completion of a POLST forms should never be mandatory. Facilities may have policies requiring certain patients be offered the opportunity to have the conversation and complete one, but completion of a POLST form should always be voluntary.

## ***How is a POLST Form different from an advance directive?***

An advance directive is a legal document that allows the patient to share his/her wishes with his/her health care team if he/she can't speak for his or herself. These forms:

- Identify the person he/she wants the health care team to work with in making decisions about his/her medical care (known as a "surrogate"). A POLST form cannot be used to identify a surrogate.
- Say, in general, what kinds of medical treatment he/she would or would not want and is not specific to a particular medical condition.
- An advance directive is a legal document that should be completed by all adults. A POLST Form is a medical order that is only for seriously ill or frail individuals

## ***How can I talk to my doctor if I think a POLST Form is right for me or someone close to me?***

- Tell the doctor you are thinking about a POLST Form.
- Find out if you or the person close to you are at high risk for a medical emergency.
- Ask the doctor to explain the illness and how it will effect life over the next 6 months and over the next 12 months.
- Explain to the doctor exactly what quality of life means to you or the person close to you.
- Tell the doctor if your family would like time to discuss and plan for what should happen in a medical emergency.