

What is a POLST?

How can it help with my medical care?



As people with a serious illness get sicker, it is very important to:

- Think about treatment they want and do not want
- Tell their doctor what treatments they want and do not want if they are not able to speak for themselves
- Have their doctor turn their treatment wishes into a medical order
- Know that they can change their mind at any time with their doctor

POLST (Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment) is the way to do this.

What is a POLST?

POLST stands for **Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment**. It turns patients' wishes for treatment into **medical orders**.

POLST is for people with serious illness such as advanced heart or lung disease, or cancer that has spread. It is also for people who are older and frail and might not want all treatment.

What is the Oregon POLST Registry?

All POLST forms in Oregon are sent to the Oregon POLST Registry, if the patient agrees. This means that medical staff can quickly access someone's medical orders online in an emergency.

What is the difference between an Advance Directive and a POLST?

Advance Directive: a legal form	POLST: a medical order
For healthy people 18 and older.	For people with serious illness or who are older and frail and may or may not want all treatment.
It is not a medical order and cannot be followed in an emergency.	This is a medical order decided by you and signed by your doctor.
You give basic instructions about the care you would like in the future. And you choose someone to make medical decisions for you if you are not able to speak for yourself.	You state what treatments you want and do not want. Emergency and other medical staff must follow these instructions.
You can fill it out on your own.	You fill it out with your doctor or nurse practitioner.
You can change it at any time on your own.	You and your doctor can change your POLST at any time.
It is up to you to make sure it is available if it is needed.	It becomes part of the Oregon POLST Registry. This means that medical staff can quickly access your medical orders in an emergency.

*Visit www.oregonhealthdecisions.org to learn more about an Advance Directive

I'm over 65 and in good health. Do I need a POLST?

No. Many seniors over 65 are too healthy to have a POLST. If you are in good health and have a sudden medical emergency, you will want to be sure that everything is done to give you a chance to recover. Only if you cannot get better will you want to think about limiting the care you receive.

An Advance Directive is the right choice for you if you are a healthy senior.

Does Medicare pay for a visit with the doctor to fill out a POLST?

Yes. Medicare does pay for a visit with the doctor* to talk about and fill out a POLST. Most private insurances do too.

Where do I get a POLST?

*From your doctor, nurse practitioner or physician assistant.

What happens when I fill out a POLST form?

If you agree, your POLST information will be sent to the Oregon POLST Registry. You will receive a confirmation letter, a magnet, and a set of stickers. The magnet and stickers tell emergency medical personnel that you have a POLST.

What do I do next?

To learn more about POLST go to www.oregonpolst.org. You can look at videos and other helpful materials there. Talk with your family. Then, when you are ready, schedule a visit with your doctor.

These stories explain when to use a POLST form:

When You Want to Give Your Loved Ones Peace of Mind — Lee's Story



When Lee was dying, her POLST gave great comfort to her and her husband, Rick.

Lee and Rick shared nearly 30 years of happy marriage together. They raised their two children in a home filled with love.

Lee had cancer in her back. For the last eight years of their marriage she had suffered through 20 painful surgeries. When the cancer kept coming back and spread, she “was done.” She was sure that she did not want any more treatment once she knew she could not recover.

Lee was very clear about the care she did and did not want. She wanted to die at home with her family around her, and with the least amount of medical treatment.

To turn her wishes about the care she wanted into medical orders that would be followed at a time of crisis, Lee filled out a POLST with her doctor. It was very important to her that her family would not have to make hard choices about her care if she could not speak for herself.

Knowing she had a POLST was very comforting to Lee and her family.

“A POLST lifts a huge burden from the rest of your family,” she said. “Now, if Rick or the children have to make choices because I’m not able to, they know exactly what to say. And there will be no worrying on their part. To me that’s giving them great peace of mind.”

“I find it really helpful to know what Lee wants,” Rick agreed. “I don’t want to get to the end and get scared and wonder does Lee want this or that? Or what do I need to do? It’s hard enough dealing with this illness without adding that layer of fear.”

Lee and Rick spoke frankly about death and how their talks about Lee’s POLST helped them face what was coming. Later Lee died peacefully at home, just as she wanted, with her loving family at her side. With the POLST, she spared them unneeded stress. **She and they drew so much comfort from knowing that she received only the care she wanted when she could no longer speak for herself.**

When Advance Directives Are Not Enough — Max’s Story



Max wanted to die a natural death. But he needed a POLST to turn this wish into medical orders that would be followed in an emergency.

Max adored his family and friends. He was an active man who loved to dance, have fun and be out in nature.

When he was 75 years old, he got the news that he had a severe heart problem. He had a hard choice to make. He could have risky surgery or he could let nature take its course. Max was very certain about what he wanted. Because he had other health problems as well, he was clear that he did not want the surgery or any other major treatment. He wanted to die a natural death.

So he filled out an Advance Directive right away. He checked “I Do Not Want Life Support.” He thought that this would be enough to tell others what treatment he wanted.

But, sadly, this did **not** ensure that his wishes were followed.

Later, Max collapsed from a failing heart. Emergency medical personnel (EMTs) did everything they could to revive him. When they told his wife that Max had had no heart beat for 15 minutes, she begged them to stop. She explained that she had his Advance Directive in her purse that said he would not want any more care.

But the EMTs did not stop. They could not. Because **EMTs must do all they can to save a life in an emergency — unless they have *medical orders* to let them know this is not what the patient wants.**

An Advance Directive provides basic instructions about the care someone wants if they cannot speak for themselves. But it is not a medical order. **Max needed a POLST to turn his wishes for care into medical orders that would be followed in this type of emergency.**

A POLST would have allowed him the peaceful death he wanted. That would have been a great comfort to his loving family.



DEVELOPED BY THE OREGON POLST TASK FORCE

