

# 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.

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### 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 <b>not a medical order</b> and cannot be followed in an emergency.	This is a <b>medical order</b> 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](http://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](http://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.

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These stories explain when to use a POLST form:

## 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.

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## When You Want to Give Yourself and Your Loved Ones Peace of Mind — Gladys' Story



Gladys' POLST lets her choose some treatments and refuse others.

Gladys and her husband, Orlando, came to the United States in 1980. It was a hard beginning. But they worked to build very good lives here with a large, loving group of family and friends.

Gladys was diagnosed with breast cancer. She suffered problems from the treatments. So it was vital to her to have a POLST to tell her family and doctors what treatments she did and did not want if she could no longer speak for herself.

She had watched her niece go through a slow and painful death in a hospital “with many machines.” She knew she would never want to die this way. “That is no way to live,” she says. “I don’t want to suffer for nothing. And when you sign the POLST you know that you don’t have to go through that pain.”

Gladys’ POLST lets her choose some treatments and refuse others. For instance, she does want to go to the hospital if she needs to. She also wants to be treated for a lung infection if that happens. But she feels very strongly that she does not want to be in Intensive Care and kept alive on machines.

Because her form is signed by her doctor, these wishes are medical orders that will be followed if she has a medical emergency.

Having a POLST has helped Gladys feel at peace with her situation: “Even when I had the cancer, I felt peaceful because I knew I had the POLST. I know my daughter is going to do whatever I said to do, and my doctor too. **I have taken away the burden from her of deciding what to do if that’s necessary.**”

For her daughter, Karen, this is a great relief. “The POLST allows you to have a clear conscience because you are honoring the wishes of your loved one,” she says. “**It helps me defend my mom’s wishes and defend myself if family members don’t agree.**”

Gladys knows she can change her POLST at any time if her health changes. Now, having a POLST gives her peace of mind to focus on what matters to her most—being with her many family members, visiting loved ones in El Salvador, and watching her two grandkids grow up.

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DEVELOPED BY THE OREGON POLST COALITION

Oregon POLST Program  
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PHYSICIAN ORDERS FOR LIFE-SUSTAINING TREATMENT