

Getting your affairs in order

Information for people affected by cancer

It's a good idea for everyone to get their affairs in order, whether you have cancer or not. By preparing a few simple documents, you can make sure that your wishes are followed, and you will make things easier for your family at a difficult time.

'Getting your affairs in order' usually means:

- making a will
- preparing documents that will help others to make decisions for you if you're not able to make them yourself
- nominating a beneficiary for your superannuation and insurance
- sorting out legal and financial paperwork.

This fact sheet explains the key issues involved in getting your affairs in order.

Making a will

A will is a legal document that records what you want to happen to your assets after you die. These assets are called your estate.

Who can make a will?

Anyone aged 18 or older (or under 18 and married) can make a will, as long as they have 'testamentary capacity'. This means that they:

- understand what a will is
- can communicate what they want to put in their will and why.

If there could be any doubt about whether you have testamentary capacity (for example, if you are on heavy pain medication that is affecting how you think), it's a good idea to get a doctor's certificate.

Who should make a will?

All adults should have a valid will. It's the best way to make sure that your assets are distributed

in the way you would like after you die. If you don't make a will, the law will decide who gets your property when you die, and it might not be who you would like.

Why is it important to make a will?

Even if you don't own much, making a will is a good idea. Having a will makes it easier for your family and friends to make legal and financial arrangements after you die. Without a will, these arrangements can be complicated and expensive.

A will is particularly important for anyone with a family or dependants, especially if you are separated or divorced.

How do I make a will?

There are a number of ways to make a will.

- **Talk to an expert** – A lawyer can help you draft a will. Some people draft their own wills using kits bought from a newsagency or post office. However, there are certain requirements for a will to be valid (see *What makes a will valid?* on page 2) and using a lawyer ensures you get it right. Lawyers charge different fees to draft wills. Ask around to make sure you get the best deal. If you can't afford to pay, Cancer Council may be able to arrange a lawyer to draft a will for free.
- **Use the Public Trustee for the ACT** – This is a government body that can help you draw up a will for free, but you must appoint them as executor of the estate. The Public Trustee for the ACT will charge fees to administer the estate after you die.

What's in a will?

Wills usually include:

- who you want to leave your money and property to (beneficiaries)

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- who should have responsibility for administering your estate (executor)
- who should look after your children if you and the other parent both die before any of your children turn 18 (guardians).

Before you talk to a lawyer, have a think about who you would like to appoint in these roles.

Some assets such as superannuation and insurance may not form part of your estate. Benefits may be paid directly to your dependants, which means your will won't have any effect on them. For more information, see *Superannuation death benefit nominations* on page 4.

What makes a will valid?

For a will to be valid it must be:

- in writing – (handwritten, typed or printed)
- signed and dated on every page
- witnessed by two people who are aged over 18. They will need to witness your signature and sign their own name on every page. They need to both be present and sign at the same time.



Witnessing a signature doesn't mean you wrote the will or have read and understood what's in it. It just means that you saw the testator (person who made the will) sign the document. Anyone aged over 18 can be a witness. It's a good idea for everyone – the testator and witnesses – to use the same pen.

If your will is not made in this manner, it may not be enforceable. The Court has the power to grant probate (confirm that the will is valid) or deny probate, and your property could be disposed of as if you had not made a will. In exercising this power, the Court needs to be satisfied that the document sets out how you want your assets to be distributed.

Where should I keep my will?

Keep your will in a safe place. Your lawyer will usually hold the will for you, or you could keep it with your other important documents. It's important you tell your executor where your will is kept.

I made a will a few years ago. Do I have to redo it?

It's a good idea to review a will regularly (e.g. every five years) to see if it needs updating.

If you have been married, divorced, separated or had children since your last will, it may be a good idea to write a new will or have your lawyer help you make a formal addition called a codicil.

Can anyone challenge my will?

Anyone who has an interest in your life can challenge your will. The law expects people to make 'proper provision' for certain people.

These include:

- your current and former partners, including de facto partners
- the other parent of your children
- your children, as well as step children and grandchildren, and nephews and nieces, in some circumstances
- your parents, in some circumstances.

If you don't make provisions for these people, they can go to court and challenge your will.

The Court will consider their needs, their relationship to you and whether they contributed to your estate (e.g. as part of a marriage).

If you want to leave any of these people out of your will, you should talk to a lawyer.

What happens if I don't make a will?

An administrator (often a relative) will be appointed to carry out similar duties to an executor. The law provides a formula for the distribution of assets of a person who has not left a will. This may not work out the way you would have wanted.

If you don't have a will, legal procedures may be more complicated and time-consuming. This may cause expense and worry to your family.

Advance care planning

Advance care planning means preparing documents now that will help your family and friends make decisions on your behalf if you're not able to make them yourself. This includes decisions about your

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finances, property, medical care and lifestyle. There are three ways your wishes can be recorded in advance care planning in the ACT:

- enduring power of attorney
- statement of choices
- health direction

As is the case with a will, you need to have capacity to make these documents. This means understanding what the documents are and communicating what you want to include in them, and why. If there could be any doubt about your capacity, it's a good idea to get a doctor's certificate to prove you have capacity.

Before making these documents, you may want to identify a person or people you trust and communicate your wishes to them.

Where to keep your advance care planning documents

You should keep copies of each document at home, and give one to your GP, oncologist, attorney and a family member or friend. You can ask for it to be placed in your medical record and for your solicitor to keep a copy.

Enduring power of attorney

An enduring power of attorney gives another person (the attorney) the power to make financial, personal and health care decisions for you.

Types of decisions they can't make – The appointed person can't make certain important decisions, like voting on your behalf or making your will.

You can also impose conditions or limitations on the attorney's power – for example, to prevent them selling a particular asset that you own, or if you don't want certain medical treatment.

Who can be appointed – You can appoint any person you trust who is aged 18 or over as your enduring power of attorney. You can appoint more than one person if you would prefer, and you can specify that they must act jointly (make all decisions together) or severally (decisions can be made by either person).

You can decide whether the enduring power of attorney begins straightaway or only if you lose the ability to make decisions for yourself.

How to make an enduring power of attorney – Download a form from the Public Advocate of the ACT website, publicadvocate.act.gov.au/enduring_power_of_attorney. The form has to be witnessed by two people, including one person authorised to take statutory declarations, such as a lawyer or a justice of the peace.

If you haven't made an enduring power of attorney and you lose the ability to make your own decisions, the ACT Civil & Administrative Tribunal can appoint a guardian or manager to make decisions for you. This will usually be a family member, but it may not be the person you would have chosen yourself.

Statement of Choices

A Statement of Choices is a document that sets out your wishes for your future medical care. This is sometimes called a living will.

Types of issues it covers – Whether you want to receive artificial nutrition or hydration, whether you want to be resuscitated, or whether you want to receive antibiotics as part of your treatment. The more guidance you provide on your preferences, the more likely your family and health care providers will make decisions that respect your wishes.

Types of decisions they can make – You can specify the types of decisions allowed.

- Financial decisions, e.g. managing your bank accounts, paying bills, selling property, and dealing with government departments, such as Centrelink.
- Medical and lifestyle decisions, e.g. what treatment you should receive (or stop receiving), where you should live and who should visit you.



An enduring power of attorney is similar to an ordinary (or 'general') power of attorney, except that it 'endures' beyond a loss of capacity. This means that if you lose consciousness, or you're too sick to make decisions, the enduring power of attorney still operates.

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A Statement of Choices only comes into effect if you're unable to make your own decisions, but to be valid, it needs to be made while you are still mentally competent.

If you make a Statement of Choices and an enduring power of attorney, your attorney must comply with your Statement of Choices.

How to make a Statement of Choices – Download a form from the Respecting Patient Choices website, respectingpatientchoices.org.au.

Health Direction

A Health Direction is a document that allows you to instruct medical professionals to withdraw or withhold certain medical treatment.

A Health Direction is automatically revoked if you also make an enduring power of attorney covering health care matters.

How to make a Health Direction – Download a form from cdn.justice.act.gov.au/resources/uploads/PAACT/forms/health_direction.pdf. The document will need to be witnessed by two people.

Superannuation death benefit nominations

When a member of a superannuation fund dies, the fund pays out their death benefit to one or more of their dependants. This includes the preserved amount (the contributions the member made while they were working) and any insurance benefit.

You can tell your superannuation fund who you would like to receive your death benefit. You can do this by completing a death benefit nomination or a binding death benefit nomination. The binding nomination means the fund trustee must follow

your wishes. Binding death benefit nominations must be updated every three years. Contact your superannuation fund for a nomination form. If you make a binding death benefit nomination, it will cancel out any other nominations made in your will regarding your superannuation.

You can only nominate someone who is a financial dependant (or interdependant), such as a spouse, de facto partner or child. If you have another life insurance policy (not connected to your superannuation account), you will need to nominate the beneficiary of that policy separately. Contact your insurer to do this.

Many superannuation funds offer life insurance as a default option. See the *Superannuation and cancer* fact sheet for details.



Organising your paperwork

It's a good idea to have all of your paperwork in the one place. This will make it easier if, for example, you need to be in hospital for a long time and a family member has to help you with financial and legal matters.

Where to get help and more information

- Cancer Council **13 11 20** for Information and Support
- Public Advocate of the ACT
publicadvocate.act.gov.au
02 6207 0707
- Public Trustee for the ACT
publictrustee.act.gov.au
02 6207 9800

Note to reader

This fact sheet provides general information relevant to ACT only and is not a substitute for legal advice. You should talk to a lawyer about your specific situation.

Cancer Council ACT
5 Richmond Avenue, Fairbairn ACT 2609
Cancer Council 13 11 20 for Information and Support
Facsimile (02) 6257 5055
Email reception@actcancer.org
Website actcancer.org



For information and support on cancer-related issues, call Cancer Council **13 11 20**. This is a confidential service.