Lung disease can take your life. While it may be unpleasant to plan for death, you can make some decisions now which will bring you and loved ones comfort.

1. What medical care choices do I have as my lung disease worsens?

You do have choices. Your options include life support measures in an intensive care unit with the use of a breathing tube and a mechanical ventilator (breathing machine); use of medications to attempt to reverse an inflammation or infection with or without the use of a breathing machine; or comfort care measures. Discuss the alternatives with your doctor. You need to understand each of these options to make educated choices.

2. Will mechanical ventilation improve my lung disease?

Mechanical ventilators do not treat your lung disease. They are used to support your breathing and assist in giving oxygen to your body to keep you alive when you cannot do it on your own.

3. But if my lung disease is a terminal illness, will my lungs heal if given time on a mechanical ventilator?

Mechanical ventilators are often used to help an acute, reversible lung disease such as pneumonia. If your lung disease is not reversible, such as severe emphysema, it may be at a terminal stage. In these situations, use of a mechanical ventilator may prolong your life, but will not improve or cure your lung disease. You may or may not be able to come off the artificial life support and breathe again on your own. You have the right to limit artificial life support measures if this is your choice.

4. If I go on a ventilator, can I choose to stop it?

Yes. Discuss this with your doctor. In a crisis situation, you may want artificial life support measures started. However, if you are not improving, this support can be stopped. Your doctor can give you medicine to make you comfortable during this process.

5. If I choose not to be placed on a mechanical ventilator, what will happen to me?

If your lungs are severely damaged so that gas exchange no longer meets the needs of your body, then nature will take its course, and you will die.

6. If I choose to let nature take its course, will I suffer? Will I feel short of breath? Are there treatments to prevent this?

You do not have to suffer. Your doctor can give medical care that allows you to die comfortably. Medication is available to decrease or eliminate anxiety, pain, and the sensation of shortness of breath.

7. Is this a form of suicide or physician aid in dying?

No. A decision to decline treatments is not suicide, because it simply allows the disease to take its
natural course. Your physician’s role does not change. If aggressive, curative treatment cannot improve the course of your terminal illness, comfort care is appropriate. You, the patient, make this decision with your doctor. The care you doctor will give you is not designed to hasten your death. Your physician’s role is to help relieve suffering in the final stages of your illness.

8 **What do I do now?**

Make your wishes known to your spouse, family, close friend(s), doctor, and clergy. Fill out an “Advance Directives” form to appoint a person to make health care decisions for you in the event that you are unable to do so yourself, and to make known your wishes regarding the medical treatment you do or do not want. Ask your physician for forms.

Decide and make your wishes known as to where you prefer to die—at home, in the hospital, or in a hospice. You should discuss openly with your physician and care givers what to do if a crisis arises as you approach death. Decide if you want loved ones or care givers to call 911 if you start to fail at home. Let them know your decision. If you do not want aggressive resuscitation efforts to be made, make those wishes known using an Advance Directives form, which is honored everywhere in California. Paramedics who arrive and see the signed form (or a medallion with DNR instructions) will offer comfort care or transportation, but will not begin CPR. Get this form from your doctor or the Emergency Medical Services Agency within your County Health Department. Making your care preferences clear will spare your family from making painfully uncertain decisions. Learn more about the hospice in your area and consider using its services. Hospice delivers comfort care to terminally ill patients at a facility or at home.

9 **How can this be organized since we don’t know when I might die? Will it go smoothly?**

Working with your doctor, sometimes with the help of a hospice, allows you and your loved ones to prepare for your approaching death. The focus is not only on your medical needs, but on your emotional and spiritual needs as well. The goal is to have you, the patient, gain control of your life situation and to progress towards death with dignity, serenity, and comfort.

By preparing in this way for your approaching death, your doctor can initiate medical therapy to ease or eliminate your pain and suffering as your condition worsens.

10 **Will I be afraid?**

Many people are afraid. Yet good preparation is the best assurance that you can overcome your fear so that when you die, you can be comfortable and at peace.
CONTACT YOUR AMERICAN LUNG ASSOCIATION: CALL 1-800-LUNG-USA, or download ALA public and patient items at www.lungusa.org

Visit the ALA of California website for state activities & advocacy issues at www.CaliforniaLung.org

Improving Life, One Breath at a Time

We welcome your comments: see CTS contact information above!