

# I'm a Substitute Decision-Maker: What I Need to Know?

A Substitute Decision Maker (SDM) is a spokesperson for health care decisions. SDMs can be named legally with a Representation Agreement or selected using the Temporary Substitute Decision-Maker Hierarchy (see below). Being an SDM is an honour. It means that the person (family member, friend, loved one) is trusting you to speak on their behalf if they are not able to speak for themselves. The choices you will make need to reflect the person's beliefs, values, and wishes, which may be different than your own. You may have questions about what it means to be an SDM. Getting prepared can help you feel less worried for what is ahead.

The **provincial Temporary Substitute Decision-Maker** Hierarchy is what the health care team will follow if there is no court-appointed committee or person, Advance Directive or a legally named Representative. They are selected in the following order:

- A spouse (married, common-law, same sex - length of time living together doesn't matter)
- A son or daughter (19 or older, birth order doesn't matter)
- A parent (either, may be adoptive)
- A brother or sister (birth order doesn't matter)
- A grandparent
- A grandchild (birth order doesn't matter)
- Anyone else related to you by birth or adoption
- A close friend
- A person immediately related to you by marriage (in-laws, stepparents, stepchildren, etc.)

## How do I prepare for the role of Substitute Decision-Maker?

**THINK:** Be aware of your own beliefs and values and how these might affect decision-making. Ask yourself, "what would the person want?, what questions do I have?, what support do I need?"

**LEARN:** Learn about the person's values, beliefs, health conditions, and wishes for healthcare. Learn about advance care planning. See FNHA's Advance Care Planning webpage. **Remember to take time to fully understand the legal documents that have been signed.**

**DECIDE:** Decide if you feel able to be a SDM. You will help decide if the care being offered is the right kind of care. Decide if you have enough information to make a decision and who you can ask for help.



**TALK:** Talk to the person about their needs and see if they are willing to have a family meeting to share their wishes. Talk with health care providers, Elders/Knowledge carriers or spiritual guides for guidance. Express the person's wishes, values and beliefs exactly as they would **when they are unable** to themselves. Follow the [Coming Full Circle](#) guide for support.

**RECORD:** Have the person record their wishes. You can use legal documents, advance care planning workbooks like Your Care, Your Choices, or record them on video. It will help you remember. Know where the records are kept. Ask for a copy and keep it in a safe place. Review the person's wishes regularly to see if anything has changed.

## The goal is to make sure the person's wishes are honoured and respected.

### How to get the conversation going and keep it going?

- Be brave, gentle, and honour the sacred time
- Help the person think about what's important to them by asking questions like:
  - Who are the key people in your life?
  - What spiritual, cultural, or religious beliefs are important to you?
  - If you have to leave home for care, who would you like to go with you?
  - If you were very sick, what would you worry about the most?
- Make a "joy list"- what brings them happiness?
- Continue talking. It's important to check to make sure you understand what the person wants for their future health care. Their wishes may change over time.

### When the time comes to be a SDM, remember...

- The healthcare team will work with you to help decide on the best treatment options
- Be available to make decisions when needed
- Remember the steps you used to prepare: Think, Learn, Decide, Talk, Record
- You will be advocating for your person when they cannot speak for themselves; if something doesn't feel right, speak up
- Ask to speak with an Indigenous Patient Navigator for cultural support, help with advocating, or for more resources
- Take time for self-care; check in with yourself and care for your mind, body, and spirit in whatever way you need. Showing up as a SDM means showing up for yourself too!

For more information, visit the FNHA Advance Care Planning webpage:

<https://www.fnha.ca/what-we-do/healthy-living/advance-care-planning>