

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR CONSUMERS

What does 'POLST' stand for?

POLST stands for Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment.

What is the POLST form?

POLST is a medical order that helps give patients with chronic or serious illness more control over their care during serious illness. Produced on a distinctive bright pink form and signed by the doctor, nurse practitioner or physician assistant AND the patient or their decision-maker, POLST specifies the types of medical treatment that a patient wishes to receive towards the end of life. As a result, POLST can prevent unwanted or medically ineffective treatment, reduce patient and family suffering, and help ensure that patients' wishes are honored.

What information is included on the POLST form?

The decisions documented on the POLST form include whether to:

- Attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation,
- Use high intensity treatments,
- Use a ventilator to help with breathing, and
- Provide artificial nutrition by tube.

Is POLST required by law?

NO. Filling out a POLST form is entirely voluntary, but California law requires that the medical orders in a POLST be followed by healthcare providers.

Who should have a POLST form?

The POLST is designed specifically for seriously ill patients and those with chronic, progressive illness. However, anyone who feels the need may have a POLST. There is no age limit.

I have an Advance Directive. Do I need a POLST too?

Maybe. The POLST is not intended to replace an advance directive. You still need an Advance Directive to appoint a legal healthcare decision-maker – someone authorized by you to speak on your behalf if you no longer can speak for yourself. An Advance Directive is recommended for all adults, regardless of their health status because an accident or sudden health crisis can happen to anyone. A POLST is based on a patient's current health status, so it may not be appropriate for people who have a longer life expectancy because treatment wishes and goals for care can change significantly over time, based on personal life goals, age, overall health and long-term prognosis.

If someone has a POLST form and an Advance Directive that conflict, which one will be followed?

If there is a conflict between the two documents, the more recent document would be followed.

Who fills out the POLST form?

POLST is more than a check-box form. A healthcare professional, usually a doctor, nurse, or social worker, should fill out the form after having a conversation with the patient to discuss the patient's current health status, his/her wishes and goals of care. In order for the form to be valid, it must be signed by the patient (or their decision-maker) AND the physician, nurse practitioner or physician assistant.

What if my loved one can no longer communicate her/his wishes for care?

A healthcare professional can complete the POLST form based on family members' understanding of their loved one's wishes. The appointed decision-maker can then sign the POLST form on behalf of their loved one.

What happens to my POLST form after it is completed and signed?

The original POLST form, on bright pink paper, belongs to the patient, and stays with you at all times.

- If at home, place your form in a visible location so it can be found easily by emergency medical personnel – usually on a table near your bed, or on the refrigerator.
- If you are out and about, you may want to keep a copy of the POLST in your purse or wallet.
- In a hospital, nursing home, or assisted living facility, the form will be in your medical record or file until you are discharged.
- Your primary care physician should have a photocopy for your medical file.

I've chosen not to have CPR if my heart stops. I have a POLST, and I carry it in my purse, but I worry about what will happen if I'm away from home and I have a heart attack.

How will EMS know I have a POLST?

As an added layer of protection, you may want to obtain a DNR/POLST bracelet or medallion. These can be ordered through one of the two (2) state-approved providers for California – the [MedicAlert Foundation](#) (1-888-633-4298) and [Caring Advocates](#) (800-647-3223).

Does the POLST have to be on the bright pink paper?

NO. The bright pink paper is used so that the form is easy to find and recognize in an emergency. However, the POLST is valid on any color paper and photocopies are also valid.

Can I change or void my POLST form?

YES, you can change or void your POLST form at any time, verbally or in writing. Your treatment wishes should be based on your current medical condition, so it is a good idea to review the decisions on your POLST form when any of the following occur:

- There is a change in your overall health, or you are diagnosed with an illness;
- You are transferred from one setting to another, for example you go from your home to the hospital, or you are discharged from the hospital to a nursing home;
- Your treatment preferences change for any reason.

Do I need a new POLST if I change doctors or if the doctor who signed my POLST retires?

NO. Once your POLST has been signed by you and a California-licensed doctor, nurse practitioner or physician assistant, it remains valid until you or your decision-maker decide to change or void it.

I want to change my POLST. Can I just make the changes on my current POLST and initial it?

NO. You don't want there to be any confusion regarding your POLST choices. You should complete a new POLST and have it signed, then void the old one. To void the POLST, draw a diagonal line across the front, write "VOID" on it and sign and date the line. Keep the voided form in your files. Remember to provide updated copies to anyone who might have your POLST on file.

Under "Additional Orders," on the POLST, can I add personal instructions, like family members I don't want at my bedside, or whether I want to be cremated?

The “Additional Orders” section is for additional medical orders. An advance directive is the document for patients to provide more detail on such things as pets, family members or disposal of their remains.

Can someone else change my POLST if I am incapacitated?

Only under limited circumstances. A legally recognized decision-maker may request to modify POLST orders, in collaboration with the physician, based on the known desires of the patient or, if unknown, the patient’s best interests.

Do I have to involve my family in the POLST discussion?

These discussions can be difficult, but they are very important. You give your family a gift when you share your thoughts and choices because you are helping reduce possible conflict and alleviate stress during a future health crisis. However, you are not required to include family in your POLST choices or discussion.

What happens if I don’t have a POLST form?

Without a POLST form, emergency medical personnel, nurses and doctors would not know your treatment wishes. You will most likely receive all possible treatments, whether you want them or not. Talking about your treatment choices with your loved ones and your medical team before a problem occurs can guide them and help ensure you get the care you want.

Are faxed copies and/or photocopies of my POLST valid? Must pink paper be used?

Faxed copies and photocopies of a POLST are valid. Printing on Ultra Pink paper is preferred because it helps make the POLST stand out from other forms in the patient’s medical record; however, the form will be honored on any color paper.

How can I get a POLST form?

Patients can request the form from their healthcare provider. It is important to discuss your goals of treatment with your healthcare provider so you can decide if POLST is right for you, and how to document your decisions appropriately on the form. The form can also be found at www.caPOLST.org, along with other helpful resources.

Do other states use POLST?

POLST was originally developed in Oregon. There are a number of states which currently have POLST or POLST-like programs in place or that are developing POLST programs. For more information on the national POLST effort, visit www.POLST.org.

When was POLST authorized in California?

California State POLST Legislation [AB 3000 (Statutes 2008, Chapter 266)] went into effect on January 1, 2009. Additional legislation (AB 637 (Statutes 2015, Chapter 207)) amended the law to add nurse practitioners and physician assistants as authorized signers as of January 1, 2016.

What if I travel to another state – will my POLST form be valid?

The California POLST form is valid in California. If you are traveling to another state, it is a good idea to take both your Advance Directive and your POLST form with you. Both documents, even if not legally binding, will help healthcare providers know your wishes.

How can I find out more about POLST?

Talk to your health care provider, or visit the California POLST website at www.caPOLST.org.