



Princess Alice
Hospice

What to expect when a person is dying

A guide for carers and families



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This guide is designed to help reassure and prepare you for what to expect in the very last days and hours of a person's life. It describes some of the changes that can occur when someone is dying. The dying process, however, is unique to each person, so if you do have any questions about what is happening and why, please do ask one of our clinical team.

Our priority is to provide the right support to our patients and their carers, families and friends so that someone's final days can be as peaceful and comfortable as possible. We tailor all our care to the specific needs of the person being cared for. Everyone involved is an important part of the 'caring team'; your views should always be heard and where possible, acted upon. We will be able to respond to your worries around possible discomfort or distress.

Changes in breathing

Breathlessness can be a common problem as people become less well. An open window or small fan may help breathlessness and reassurance can help if the person seems anxious. However, as the body becomes less active towards the end of life, the need for oxygen can be reduced. Sometimes carers remark that when a loved one is dying, their breathing is easier than it has been for a long time.

It is common for breathing to become shallower and there may be long pauses between breaths. Sometimes movements of the stomach (tummy) can become more noticeable. In the final stages of life, breathing can become noisy. This rattling sound is usually caused by a build-up of the normal fluids in the chest or throat that can no longer be properly cleared. Medication may reduce this and changes in position may also help. Whilst this noisy breathing might be upsetting to hear, it rarely causes distress for the person dying.

Restlessness

As death approaches, a person might become restless or confused. They may not recognise familiar faces, they may see things that aren't there or say things that don't make sense.

It often helps to let the person know you are there by talking to them or holding their hand. Keeping things as calm and normal as possible can help e.g. playing their favourite music can help them relax. Restlessness can have many causes, including easily corrected physical problems, such as difficulty

passing urine. If restlessness persists, medication may be needed to reduce avoidable discomfort or distress.

Reduced need for food and drink

We encourage patients to eat and drink for as long as they are able to. However, the person may not have the same desire, or need for food and drink, and typically their body will no longer be able to get the usual benefit from it.

Stopping eating and drinking is a normal part of the dying process but for carers and loved ones it can be hard to accept. Even if someone's mouth looks dry at this stage, it does not mean they are dehydrated because they have stopped drinking. Gently moisturising the mouth with a damp sponge, placing ice chips in the mouth and applying lip balm can give comfort.

The person may have fewer bowel movements as they eat less, and their urine may get darker as they drink less. They may lose control of their bladder or bowels because the muscles in these areas relax and don't work as well as they did. Support is often needed to help to keep the person clean and comfortable.

Skin changes

A person's skin may feel cold and change colour. Their hands, feet, ears and nose may feel cold to the touch. Their skin may also become pale, mottled and blue or patchy in colour. Though putting gloves or socks on the person may be comforting, as may gentle massage, there is no need to try to warm them up.

Withdrawing from the world

Withdrawing from the world tends to be a gradual process. People spend more time asleep and they can be increasingly drowsy when awake, becoming less interested in things around them and not responding readily.

This is difficult when it is someone you love, but it is part of the natural process of dying. When the person is or appears to be sleeping or resting, they may still be able to hear you. Simply being near the person, talking to them quietly and calmly and holding their hand can be of great comfort. A person may close their eyes and then not open them again. Sometimes their eyes may be half-open, which can be distressing to see. The person will usually lapse into unconsciousness and remain like this for some time, in some cases several days, although for others it is much shorter.

Most people die peacefully, comfortably and quietly.

Our support

When a loved one is dying it is likely to be a very difficult time. It can be hard to know what to do, what to say and how to cope.

Remember that we are always here to help and support you. Please do come and talk to us about how you are feeling and any concerns you may have.

Contact us

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