



Life in the final days



Caring for a person at the end of life

Caring for a person during their last weeks of life can be a time for realisation and may come with a sense of impending loss.

It is also a time of sharing and loving for many people. Letting go is often difficult but may also be a time of reflection and reminiscence.

Family and loved ones are often concerned that death will be a painful experience for the person. However, the time before death is generally quite peaceful.

The body winds down naturally sometimes over several days before death.

Keeping the dying persons room clean and comfortable is important.

Don't close all the shades and leave them in the dark.

Ensure that the sun is not shining on them but allow light to come into the room, keeping the room at an ambient temperature.

Have a fragrance in the room but do not make it a sweet smell.

You can often help by turning the persons head gently toward a light source.

Have some soothing music on very low in the background, perhaps their favourite music or something soft and calming.

Ensure that loved ones visit and hold hands or even better massage the hands to help soothe the person. Speak to them in a soft voice.

A dying person can hear you up to the final moments so talking to them is a very important opportunity to say what you need to say.

As the body starts to 'let go' of life there are physical signs that are part of the normal, natural process of the person's body gradually slowing down.

Thirst

The person's appetite and thirst may decrease, and they may have little desire to eat or drink.

As the physical body is dying, the vital organs are shutting down, and nourishment is no longer required to keep them functioning.

The body knows exactly what to do and it is a natural process, it is not painful for the person.

Sips of water if able to be tolerated can be given or a moist mouth swab will help to give comfort.

Food

As the days pass the person will lose interest in food and drink. Food and water will not help your loved one and will not keep them alive any longer.

Attempting to feed someone who is unable to swallow or who does not want to swallow can be dangerous and can cause distress.

The ability to swallow is compromised and loss of appetite and reduced intake are normal.

Eventually the person will not want any food or fluids and forcing food when the body says “no” may be harmful or painful to the dying person. Because the swallowing reflex is compromised in the final stages forcing fluid may cause choking, and or aspiration into the lungs making matters worse.

Breathing

Breathing patterns may change, sometimes the breathing may be fast, and at other times there may be long gaps between breaths.

Breathing may be shallow or noisy, this is due to blood circulation slowing down and a build-up in the body's waste products.

It is not painful or distressing for the person. When a person enters the final stage of the dying process two different dynamics are at work and they are closely interrelated and interdependent.

These physical changes are a natural way in which the body prepares itself to stop functioning.

Mouth care

It is important to ensure that the mouth is clean and moist. The lining of the mouth and tongue can become dry when the person stops taking oral fluids or is only taking very small amounts.

Frequent mouth rinses with a mouth swab followed by a moist mouth spray and gel for the lips is a very comforting and soothing process for the dying person.

The staff will provide you with everything required if you would like to help with this aspect of care and it should be done every two or three hours.

Reference list

Palliative Care Australia – Resources – The Dying Process

<https://palliativecare.org.au>

<https://www.caresearch.com.au>

Understanding the Dying Process

Cancer Research UK – In the Final Days

All information correct at time of printing September 2023.



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Confusion, restlessness and agitation

Restlessness and agitation are common. These symptoms may be caused by metabolic changes, dehydration, and some medications.

There are medications available to control symptoms. Be aware that the dying person may have unfinished business.

Dying persons may try to hold on until they feel a sense of security and completion. Picking, pulling, and fidgeting behaviors may also be seen. This can result from medications, metabolic changes, or decreased oxygen to the brain. There are things we can do to help,

- Use a gentle voice and reassuring touch
- Be sensitive to any cues that might signal that there is something the person wants to resolve before he/she can let go
- Consider the use of light massage and soothing music

Pain

No one should die in pain when there is a way to relieve it and all persons have the right to have their pain controlled.

If a person has pain before entering into the dying days then they will most certainly have pain as the process takes its course.

Always believe a person who says he/she has pain and try to remember that each person is an individual and perceptions of pain are different for everyone.

There are medications that the nursing staff may discuss with you. They are administered to bring comfort to the dying person and can assist in minimising agitation and restlessness, as well as minimising secretions and maintaining a therapeutic level of pain management.

- Pain - Morphine
- Nausea - Midazolam
- Secretions - Hyoscine Butylbromide
- Sedative - Midazolam
- Delirium - Haloperidol

Showering toileting and bed care

In the final days of life your loved one will be sponged in bed. They may be on an air mattress or a pressure relieving mattress for added comfort. It is not necessary to turn a dying resident 2 hourly as the focus is now on comfort.

The care staff will usually ensure that light sponging to freshen up and position changes are three to four hourly and this is adequate.

Applying a light moisturiser is always a good thing as the skin can become dry and this helps to soothe the person.

Contenance care is usually attended to at this time and staff will take care of this.

Giving permission

Giving permission to your loved one to let go, without making him or her feel guilty for leaving or trying to keep him or her with you to meet your own needs, can be difficult.

A dying person will normally try to hold on as long as possible, even though it may bring prolonged discomfort to them, to be sure those who are going to be left behind will be all right.

Therefore, your ability to release the dying person from this concern and to give him or her assurance that it is all right to let go whenever he or she is ready is one of the greatest gifts you have to give your loved one at this time.

When the person is ready to die and you are able to let them go, it is time for you to say goodbye.

Saying goodbye is your final gift of love to your loved one, for it achieves closure and makes the final release possible.

Tears are a normal and natural part of saying goodbye.

Grieving

Arcare has a chaplaincy service that we are committed to and we work with multiple pastors and chaplains from a range of faiths.

We can support our residents and families both during the dying days and through the death of a loved one. Please talk to your Residence Manager if you would like to see one of our visiting chaplains.