



Understanding Dying



Information for people with a life-limiting illness, their carers and loved ones.

Just as we are all individual, so too is the experience of dying. There are, however, changes that are commonly experienced in people who are dying. Being aware of these changes may lessen some of the fear and anxiety.

Managing pain

Many people (but not all) with a terminal illness may experience pain. Management of pain can be complex and regularly needs to be reviewed by the treating health team.

Less interest in eating and drinking

As the dying person nears the end of life, they will grow less interested in eating and drinking. The body's need for food and drink diminishes. This symptom can often cause distress for the family. Even though our instinct is to feed someone to show we care, it is important to remember that not wanting to eat or drink is a symptom of the end of life. It can be unhelpful to push the person to eat or drink as it may result in further burdens for them. Swallowing may deteriorate, and there will be a transition from solid foods to liquids. In the final days, it is usual for people to stop eating and drinking altogether.

Withdrawing from the world

This is a gradual process that occurs. People may focus inward and lose interest in things they used to enjoy. They may communicate less. The person dying will spend more time in bed sleeping both day and night. They may be more drowsy, disorientated, or difficult to wake. Extreme tiredness is often so pronounced that awareness of immediate surroundings decreases. Loved ones can show they care by being with the person nearing end of life and holding their hand. Hearing is thought to be the last sense to go, so when a loved one talks to the dying person, it may be a comfort for both.

Changes in breathing

Regular breathing patterns may change.

Towards the end of life there may be periods of rapid breathing and periods of long gaps between breaths. Breathing may be shallow or noisy. This is a normal part of the dying process.

As coughing and swallowing reflexes decline, saliva and mucus may collect in the back of the person's throat, causing gurgling, rattling or other noises. Changing the position of the person and/or the use of some medications may be of assistance. While these noises may be concerning to carers, they do not usually cause distress to the person.

Changes prior to death

There are some common changes that most people will experience. This can be a change in skin colour, in circulation or breathing patterns. The skin can become pale or discoloured and cool before death. There may be changes in urination and loss of bladder or bowel control.

Shortly before death, some people become restless, agitated, and confused. This is known as terminal restlessness and often occurs within the last few hours or days of life. Medication can be provided to assist if needed.

Seeking help

Caring for someone who is dying is often stressful. There may be times when carers feel like they don't know what to do, what to say or how to cope. Support is available. Talk to your health team or contact PalAssist for palliative care support and advice.



Phone: 1800 772 273
Email: info@palassist.org.au
Website: www.palassist.org.au