



What to expect when someone is dying – Residential Aged Care

Knowing what to expect as death approaches can help make this time less worrying for all concerned. This information sheet describes the signs and symptoms that can commonly occur when someone is near the end of their life. However, because each person is unique, these signs and symptoms may not all happen in every instance, nor will they necessarily happen in any particular order. Please talk to the registered nurse or doctor if you have any concerns.

Sleep

In the final stages of illness, most people feel content to stay in bed, and may spend more time sleeping. At times they may not respond to you or be hard to wake.

Foods and fluid

- It is common for people to have little interest in eating or drinking.
- Dehydration is not usually a problem as the body adapts to the reduced intake of fluids.
- Ice chips, sips of fluid through a straw, or the use of a sipper cup, make it easier to give small amounts of fluids.
- To help keep the mouth moist, mouth swabs soaked in iced water can be sucked.
- Lip balm or Vaseline is also useful to prevent dry chapped lips.

Skin

- The nose, ears, hands, and feet may feel increasingly cool to the touch.
- Sometimes the skin may look flushed and hot but not feel hot to the touch.
- Applying a cool, moist cloth to the forehead may be helpful.
- The skin on the hands, feet and on the underside of the body may become darker, change colour, mottle or discolour.

Breathing patterns

- Breathing patterns may change; there can be periods of rapid, shallow breathing or shallow breathing with long spaces in between breaths. These symptoms are very common and do not usually cause distress to the patient.
- As the patient becomes too weak to cough and swallow or is semi-conscious, they may develop rattling, noisy or gurgling breathing. This is caused by a build-up of secretions normally found in the throat and lungs. Even small amounts of secretions can produce this sound.
- Suctioning is not advised as in most cases it may cause more distress than the gurgling breathing.

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Confusion

- Confusion may be common at this time. There may be increasing confusion about time, place and the identity of even close and familiar people.
- Displaying a clock can help with keeping track of the time and day.
- Introduce visitors by name, even if they are well known.
- Keep familiar objects close by such as photos or mementoes.
- They may like a pillow or soft blanket from home that is familiar to them.
- Keep a light on for reassurance if vision is affected.

Restlessness and agitation

- Signs include twitching, plucking at the air or at bedclothes, trying to get out of bed even if unable to stand alone and moaning or calling out constantly.
- Many families find this time difficult because they feel unsure how to help.
- Keep the person calm by sitting with them and speaking quietly.
- Quiet music, radio or aromatherapy may be soothing.
- Always assume they can hear you and they will find your voice comforting.

Environment

- Some people find it comforting to make the environment more homelike by bringing in familiar things from home.
- For some it becomes important to touch or cuddle.

When death occurs

- You may wish to stay for a while after death has occurred.
- Staff will help you if you are unsure of what happens next.
- If you would like support at any stage from a spiritual or cultural service please ask the nurse to arrange this for you.

Bereavement counselling

Should you require support afterwards information on how to access this is available from Hospice, funeral directors or your doctor.

All documents available on RACIP Website: www.wdhb-agedcare.co.nz

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