

# Preparing for Your Loved Ones Death

Death comes in its own way and time to each individual. It is a quiet and natural series of events to help the body release its spirit. Thank you for letting us share in the care of this special person during their transition time. When someone close to you is dying, it is normal to have questions about what to expect. Although sad and stressful, this can be a positive process for families to share. This booklet is designed to help you to understand what to expect at the end of life and what you can do. Please use it as a guide in addition to the support our nurses and other members of our team can offer. This information applies to patients with all types of terminal illnesses. But remember that each person is different and may not have every symptom. Our staff is available to explain the stages of dying and guide you through the experience. Please feel free to ask questions and share concerns.

## Winding Down

In the final stages of life there is a gradual withdrawal from people, activities, and food. Your loved one may only have enough energy to be with one or two people. He or she may be sleepier, wishing to stay in one place and nap more. This may be due to:

- Fatigue
- The disease process
- Depression
- Medications used to control pain or restlessness
- Insomnia

Just sitting quietly beside them can be comforting. A light touch and companionable silence can speak greatly of your concern and love.

## Comfort

You may wonder if the dying process will be painful. Pain, restlessness, or anxiety is possible. There are many ways to relieve pain.

Medications:

- Injections (shots)
- Medication in the vein (intravenously)
- Oral medications (by mouth)
- Suppositories
- Skin patches

Comfort measures:

- Heating pads -Changing positions
- Massage
- Special beds or mattresses - Extra pillows for support -Music
- Television
- Prayer

There may be times when your loved one will still have some pain, in spite of our attempts to relieve it. We will continue to try different combinations of methods to relieve as much pain as possible. Families are often concerned that if a patient can no longer speak we will not know they are in pain. Physical signs that may indicate pain include:

- Grimacing
- Clenched fists
- Restlessness
- Tense or rigid body
- Sweating
- Increase in breathing or heart beat - Moaning
- Insomnia

You can help by watching for these signs of pain and discussing them with your nurse.

## Nutrition

Aggressive nutritional support such as IVs or tube feedings may not benefit a person who is dying. Frequently there will be more than one body system failing, causing nutrients and fluids to produce distressing symptoms. The disease process can:

- Change the desire to eat and/or the ability to digest food.
- Leave the patient with no energy or interest in eating. Therefore, it can change a pleasant experience to a distressing one.
- It is not unusual for patients to have food cravings that change from one moment to the next. They may also eat well at one meal and have no appetite for the next. It is our philosophy to allow the patient's wishes in regard to eating.

1. Families are encouraged to bring favorite foods from home (a refrigerator is available for food storage).
2. Our patient's food preferences are more important than nutritional content.
3. It is normal for a patient very close to death to refuse food completely.  
Patients who are close to death do not feel hungry or thirsty. They are not starving. Nature is at work assisting them to die in a more comfortable way.

## Breathing

The patient's disease is one factor that can affect the breathing pattern. Cancer sometimes spreads to the area of the brain where the breathing control center is located. It can also affect other body systems, causing changes in breathing. The breathing pattern may become slower as well as irregular, or there may be pauses. Medication can cause slowing of breathing but this does not cause discomfort to the dying person. Breathing may become noisy and congested or labored with a rattling sound. Congestion may be caused by:

- The disease process
- Immobility
- Weakness
- Lowered resistance
- Infection

Medication, breathing treatments, oxygen, and other comfort measures such as repositioning can relieve symptoms. Suction is occasionally used but is not always helpful.

## *Communication*

Often people wonder if the person is able to hear even though they cannot respond. Hearing is believed to be the last of the senses to go. Even when they are in a coma or deep sleep, the patient may be able to recognize familiar voices and sounds. It is good to talk to them - the sound of a familiar voice may be comforting - feel free to say whatever is in your heart.

Sometimes the dying person may need to hear you say you love them, but it is okay to leave when he or she is ready. If tears come, they are natural and a special way to say goodbye.

Touching is important. It is soothing and communicates feelings of security and love. There may be times that touching could increase pain and anxiety. During these times, just your being there may make the patient feel secure. Let the patient's reaction to touch guide you.

Spiritual and family issues may arise at this time. Our chaplains are available for spiritual care and support. Our social worker may be able to help with family and legal issues.

## *When Death is Near*

Knowing exactly when a person will die is difficult to determine. But in many cases there are obvious signs of approaching death. These signs include:

- Changes in breathing
- Longer pauses between breaths
- Bluish color to lips, nail beds, legs
- Cool skin
- Restlessness, confusion, or speaking to unseen persons
- Muscle twitching in hands, feet, arms, and legs
- Loss of bowel or bladder control and/or decrease in the amount of urine
- Weak pulse that is difficult to detect

There are no limitations on visiting hours. If you wish to spend the night we will provide sleeping cots, blankets etc. A family lounge is available for your respite. Make coffee, which is provided, and use the refrigerator to store snacks or other supplies.

Every effort will be made to notify you when death is near. If for any reason family or friends are unable to be there, staff members will try to be at the bedside while the patient is dying. Again, every effort will be made to notify you of impending death so that you may choose to be there if you wish.

## *The Time After Death*

You may spend as much time as you need with your loved one. Friends and family may also be present. If you need help making phone calls, we are available. The nursing staff will help you to complete any final paperwork. The person who is the Next of Kin will be needed to supply this information, either in person or by telephone.

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The Birmingham VA Medical Center wishes to thank the Clement Zabloci VA Medical Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for use of the material contained in this document