

The final days of life: what to expect when someone is approaching death



An information sheet for patients and their families

As illness progresses, people become weaker and need more support from those caring for them. Understanding what happens when they are approaching death will help to anticipate the care they need. Some of the things that happen at this time may seem strange or frightening, especially if they are not expected. People are individual, so it is not easy to say exactly what will happen and in what order changes might occur, but this sheet seeks to explain what may happen in the last few days and hours of life.

Eating and drinking

As people become weaker, they may need help with eating and drinking. They may feel sick or find it difficult to swallow: if this happens, it is important to tell their nurses or doctors. As people get nearer the end of their life they often don't want to eat or drink: this is normal and rarely causes them distress, though those caring for them are often worried about this. Again, it is important to let the doctors and nurses know about any concerns you may have.

Medication

As people become weaker they may find it difficult to swallow medication. Their doctor will often decide that some medications can be stopped as they are no longer needed in the final days of life. Other medications, for example pain relief, can be given in different ways.

Sleeping

As a person's illness progresses, they are likely to get weaker each day and will spend more time sleeping and become more drowsy. They will become less able to talk or join in things that are happening around them. Even if they are drowsy or asleep, they may still hear what's going on and can take comfort from hearing the usual sounds of life or hearing someone talking to them, even when they are unconscious. Towards the end, some people may lapse into unconsciousness and cannot be roused at all for a period before they die. Some people never lose consciousness and die in their sleep.

Breathing

People may experience changes to their breathing in the last days of their life. People who have had difficulty breathing may find it easier to breathe, as the body needs less oxygen because it is less active. Breathing may be made worse if they are anxious. People who are very drowsy or unconscious may have noisy breathing because of a build-up of fluid in the back of the throat, which they are no longer able to cough up. Such noisy breathing does not distress the patient, though it may be distressing for those around them: it may be eased by moving the patient into a different position and by medication.

When death is near

When death is only hours away, breathing may change again, becoming shallow and irregular. Sometimes there are pauses between breaths that become longer until the last breath is taken. They may produce less urine and it will become darker in colour as they drink less. They may lose control over their bladder: if this happens the nurses will give advice. Some people may become restless, agitated or confused: if this happens, the nurse or doctor can consider giving medication. Arms and legs may become cool to the touch and blue in colour as a result of blood circulation slowing down. The skin may become dry or moist and clammy.

Support in the home.

Doctors and nurses should be visiting to check on people close to the end of life: they will be happy to answer any of your questions. They are available 24 hours a day every day of the week, though they are often particularly busy during the night.

It is normal for people to feel frightened and out of their depth when their loved one is close to death. It is OK to ask for help or just to talk to someone about your concerns and fears. In working hours call your GP practice: at nights and weekends call 111 (rather than 999) who will be able to get hold of a doctor or nurse for you.

When someone dies.

Most people stop breathing and die peacefully after a period of unconsciousness. If you think this has happened, phone your GP practice in hours, or 111 out of hours, and explain that you think they have died and that this was expected. They will arrange for someone to visit to confirm that they have died and explain what happens next and what you need to do and what support is available.

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