

# What to Expect

## Caring for your loved one in the process of dying

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This booklet describes the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the natural dying process. Each person's experience is unique, and not everyone will go through all the changes described here. We hope this provides support and information about your loved one's final days and hours.

If you have questions about your loved one's care, please ask. Our healthcare team is here to support you.



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## Timing

It is difficult to predict the exact moment of death. Some people die within a matter of hours, while others may live for days to weeks.

It's important to know that we do not hasten or prolong the natural dying process. Our role is to provide comfort during this transition and trust your loved one's individual timing.

## Changes in Appetite

Your loved one may lose interest in food and drink, and gradually stop eating and drinking. This can be very difficult for families. People often offer food as an expression of our love and concern. However, as the body shuts down, it is no longer able to process food and drink. In fact, forced feeding and drinking can cause physical discomfort during the last days of life.

- Follow your loved one's lead. Do not try to force food or drink.
- If they are still eating, this is a good time to prepare their favorite foods. Ask the nurse or doctor about which foods or drinks are best.
- If your loved one chooses not to eat, find other ways to demonstrate your love and care. Dry mouth and lips are common at the end of life. Sips of fluid, ice chips or using mouth swabs can provide comfort. Petroleum jelly can be applied to relieve chapped lips.
- Artificial nutrition and intravenous fluids do not help with comfort and may cause discomfort in this stage.

## Confusion & Restlessness

Your loved one may become confused, restless, or agitated. This is normal and can be caused by changes in the body as death approaches.

- Medications can be given to help your loved one be calm and relaxed.
- It may be comforting to bring familiar items — a special blanket, family photos, or their favorite music.
- Create a calm, peaceful environment. You may decide to limit the number of visitors in the room, or turn down the lights or television.



## Changes in Consciousness

Your loved one's energy and engagement may fluctuate as part of the dying process. You may notice they are less interested in their usual activities. They may be less interactive with others and spend more time asleep than awake. As their body gets weaker, they may be awake for only brief periods during the day. They may stop engaging with others entirely. As death approaches, they will gradually go into a coma, and they will no longer respond to their surroundings.

When death is near, some people have a sudden burst of energy. They may even be alert enough to interact with their family for brief moments. This brief period of alertness can give families the false impression that their loved one is getting better. Instead, it may be helpful to think of this as a brief gift of time to interact with them before they die.

- Allow time for rest and solitude when their energy is low.
- You may ask family and friends to record messages or write letters that can be shared with your loved one when they are awake.
- Ask your loved one if they would like visitors. Phone and video conferencing may be useful to connect with those who are unable to visit.

## Changes in Temperature & Skin

Your loved one may feel fever or chills as their body weakens.

They may feel cold to the touch as their body's circulation decreases. Their skin may appear bluish or mottled, especially in their hands and feet.

- Add or remove blankets as needed.
- Apply a cool or warm washcloth to your loved one's forehead.

## Changes in Bowel & Bladder

As your loved one drinks less, their urine will become darker and may have a strong odor. It is common to lose control over their bowel and bladder.

- Keep them warm and dry.
- Change soiled bed linens.
- Ask the nurse about a urinary catheter.

## Changes in Breathing

You may notice changes in your loved one's breathing in their last days. Fluid may collect in the lungs and throat because they are no longer strong enough to cough. You may hear gurgling and rattling sounds when your loved one breathes. They may have periods of fast and shallow breathing, followed by slower, deeper breaths. You may also notice long pauses between breaths when death is near.

- Ask the nurse if raising the head of the bed or repositioning them on their side can help.
- Using a fan to gently blow air across your loved one's face may be comforting.
- Medications can be given to relieve shortness of breath. Oxygen does not help with comfort at this stage. In fact, unnecessary tubes and masks may be uncomfortable or irritating.

## Spiritual & Dream Experiences

It is not unusual for people to speak symbolically about their death. They may have dreams about going home or going on a trip; they may have visions of people we cannot see — often a loved one who has already died.

- Invite your loved one to share about what they are experiencing. These dreams and visions are often comforting in their final days.
- Do not try to talk them out of their experience or challenge their sense of reality in this time.
- If they are frightened, offer comfort and reassurance.



## Communication

We are often concerned about how to express our feelings when a loved one is dying and worry about saying the wrong thing. It is normal in these circumstances to feel sad, helpless or awkward.

- Speak directly to your loved one, instead of talking about them to others in the room.
- If your loved one wants to talk about death, listen actively. Resist the urge to change the subject to “cheer them up.”
- Allow deeper conversations. People who are dying want to know that their lives have meaning. Invite them to share their favorite memories and share yours.
- Some people may prefer quiet and solitude at the end of life. Be assured that your presence alone can be meaningful and comforting.
- You may want to reassure your loved one that you will miss them, but you will be okay after they die. It may be comforting for them to have permission to let go when they are ready.

## Saying Goodbye after Death

When your loved one dies, they will stop breathing and have no heartbeat. Their jaw will be relaxed and their mouth may be slightly open. They will not react to your voice or touch. A nurse or physician will confirm that they have died and record the time of death.

- You may want to spend time with your loved one’s body. Tears are a natural part of saying goodbye. You don’t need to hide or apologize for them. They are normal expressions of grief and love.
- Rituals can be meaningful at this time. You may offer prayers or sacred readings, honor them by gently washing their body, or applying lotion or oils. An interfaith spiritual care provider can provide spiritual and ritual support.
- When you are ready to leave the hospital, a nurse will care for your loved one’s body and accompany them to the hospital morgue.

## Bereavement Support

The healthcare team may give you a bereavement packet with information about mortuary arrangements and grief support groups. It also includes a list of books and online resources that may be helpful. A social worker or chaplain can provide additional community resources.

For more information regarding our bereavement services, please contact **Spiritual Care at (562) 933-1450** or **Decedent Affairs at (562) 933-1458**.

# Caring for Yourself in the Process

Caring for a loved one at the end of life can be difficult. During times of high emotional and physical demands, it is important to care for and nurture your mind, body, and spirit.

## Nurturing Your Mind

Accept help. You may not be able to do all the tasks you normally do, and it's okay to allow others to support you.

Be kind and gentle to yourself. You can't expect to run at full capacity during times of high emotion and grief, so you may need to lower expectations for yourself.

## Nurturing Your Body

Listen to your body's wisdom. It will tell you when you need to cry, sleep, eat and drink, or reflect.

Get physical exercise. Even a short walk outside can improve the way you feel. Deep breaths release tension and calm your body.

Maintaining a healthy diet and getting enough sleep can contribute to your overall wellness, even when you are stressed and grieving.

## Nurturing Your Spirit

Treat yourself well. Listen to music, read, or spend time with people who are good for you.

Be still. Visual imagery, meditation, prayer, even a long hot bath can soothe your soul. It's okay to be angry. Find safe ways to express your anger, like ripping paper or yelling into a pillow.

Writing in a journal can help you work through your grief, especially if your relationship was complicated. You may also write letters to your loved one to say, "I love you, I forgive you, please forgive me, or thank you."

