

It can be very distressing. It is one of the few parts of most people's lives that remain a wholly human and natural process. Being with another who is dying can feel a long vigil, even if it is only a few minutes or hours.

What happens next?

When someone you have loved and cared for dies, it can be a very sad and distressing time. It is natural and often therapeutic to express your feelings. These may include sadness, anger and relief.

There may not be anything that anyone can say to ease your distress. You may wish to spend time saying your goodbyes. You are welcome to help with their after death care if that is helpful to you.

The ward staff can offer support by trying to answer any questions you may have. They will also give you written information about what to do next in the form of a bereavement information pack.

Care for those important to the dying person

Food and drink

The ward staff should inform you where you are able to get a drink or purchase refreshments. Please note these outlets may not be open 24/7.

Accommodation

On site accommodation may be available to close family or friends. Some wards have their own relatives' facilities. Please ask a member of staff about this.

Parking

You may be entitled to a reduced parking rate. Please ask a member of staff about this.

Spiritual care support

The spiritual care team is able to support you and your loved ones whatever you believe. The chapel is always open for peace or quiet reflection. Please ask a member of staff about this.

Companion service

Support is also available for you and your family/friends provided by Marie Curie Companions. Ward staff can refer you to this service. They can facilitate time away from the bedside allowing you to restore some energy to be with your loved one.

Improving care for others

Caring for the dying does not always go right. If you have felt that your loved one did not have a peaceful death please discuss this with the bereavement team who improve services at the hospital from this valuable feedback. The patient advice and liaison service (PALS) are also helpful if formal feedback would be helpful to you. They can also collate any feedback on excellent care which is always of great value.

When Someone is Not Expected to Recover

Last Days of Life

Care of the Dying

Introduction

It is difficult when someone close to you is not expected to recover. You may have questions about how they will be cared for and what to expect to see.

This leaflet explains some of the changes as a person dies. You are encouraged to discuss any issues which are not clear or are troublesome with the ward team.

Individualised care in the last days of life

Those caring for your relative or friend will use an individualised approach. This gives guidance on how to provide the best care for the person who is dying and those around them.

Medication

We want to ensure the comfort for your loved one and avoid unnecessary interventions.

We may use medications to control symptoms. Often we stop medications that are no longer helping. We use medications 'as required' in the appropriate quantity to help the symptom.

It may not be possible to give medication by mouth. We may give medication by injection or by a continuous infusion. We always tailor this to the individual's need.

Changes which occur before death

Dying is different for every individual. However, some changes are often seen that a person's health is declining.

Diminished need for food and drink

This can be one of the first signs that

someone's health is deteriorating. At first, increasing weakness may reduce appetite. Assisting with a drink or snack can often help. As a person becomes more poorly, swallowing may become difficult. When a person's condition continues to deteriorate, they may no longer want or need food. Fluids may be given by a drip if they have a symptomatic thirst and it is thought safe to do so. The inability to eat and drink is a normal part of dying.

It is important to keep the mouth and lips moist. You may like to help by giving regular mouth care. The nursing staff can help you to use our guidelines on mouth care for the dying person.

You can also provide care in other ways, such as spending more time with your loved one, bringing in photographs and sharing memories and news of family and friends.

Changes in communication

When a person is dying they will spend more time sleeping and less time alert and interacting with others. Slowing down to a stop is normal. Gradually the person may naturally become unconscious. They appear to be sleeping all the time and may not respond to those around them.

It is our belief that hearing is one of the last senses to go and that it can be comforting to the dying person to hear calm, familiar voices. These may be important memories, an apology, giving forgiveness or just saying how much they are loved.

Noisy breathing

As a person is no longer able to cough up normal secretions, it sometimes builds up in the chest or at the back of the throat causing a 'rattle'. It is rarely bothersome to the person themselves but may be distressing for those around the bed.

A simple change of position may improve this. Sometimes drying medication can help. Ward teams are able to discuss the best approach for such noises.

Changes in breathing

You may notice changes in the rate or pattern of breathing. This is a natural part of the dying process. The breathing may become very irregular with rapid, shallow breaths followed by long pauses. This is often an indication that death is approaching.

Difficult symptoms

Some people will experience a period of restlessness during their final few days of life. Gentle touch or a comforting voice of a loved one can help. Sometimes they may benefit from medication to reduce agitation.

Late changes of dying

During the final hours or minutes of life the person's skin may become discoloured and moist. It sometimes has a mottled appearance.

By this time they are likely to be asleep all of the time and will most likely die peacefully.

What is it like to be with someone who is dying?

We are all individuals and will cope in different ways. This is a significant time of your own life and may bring past feelings or difficulties to the forefront. It may also be a time to remember and celebrate a life well lived.