

Last Days of Life

Palliative and End of Life Care



It can be a very sad and anxious time when someone close to you is in the last days of their life. You may have lots of questions about how your relative / friend will be cared for. This leaflet explains some of the changes you may see.

Last days of life care plan

The health care professionals caring for your loved one will work with you to ensure that we deliver the best standard of care to them and to you; supporting you both through the decisions that need to be made at this difficult time.

Staff will concentrate on maximising the comfort of your loved one and both the medical and nursing team will continue to assess them on a daily basis.

Medication

We use medications to control symptoms and we will tailor this to the individual's need. Often we may stop medications that are no longer helping your loved one. We may give medication by injection, or sometimes by a continuous infusion via a syringe pump.

Changes that occur before death

Dying is different for every individual. Below, are some changes that you may observe when you see your loved one.

Diminished need for food and drink

A reduced need for food and drink can be one of the first signs that someone's health is deteriorating. At first, increasing weakness may reduce the appetite and ability to eat and drink. Assisting your loved one with a drink or small snack can often help. As a person becomes more poorly, swallowing may become difficult. When a person's condition continues to deteriorate, they usually no longer want or need food.

It is important to keep their mouth and lips clean and moist. You may like to help in giving regular mouth care; ward staff will support you with this.

The reduction in eating can be very difficult for family and friends to witness, especially if they are used to providing food for a loved one.

Changes in breathing

As the person is no longer able to cough up mucus, it sometimes builds up in the chest or at the back of the throat causing a 'rattle'. A simple change of position may improve this, sometimes medication can help. It is rarely bothersome to your loved one but may be distressing for you to hear. You may also notice changes in the rate 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.

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Yeovil Hospital
Healthcare

Changes in communication

When a person is dying, they will gradually spend more time sleeping and less time alert and interacting with others.

It is the 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. By this stage they are likely to be asleep all of the time and will most likely die in their sleep, peacefully and quietly.

Some people will experience a period of restlessness or agitation, the close touch or comforting voice of a loved one can help. Sometimes they may benefit from medication to reduce any agitation at this stage.

Spiritual care

If you feel your loved one would be comforted by anything such as familiar music, aromatherapy, or a favourite item, please discuss with the ward staff. If faith is important and you feel your loved one would be comforted by a prayer please let the ward staff know and we can organise this for you.

Multi-faith support is available via the Chaplaincy Team. They are able to provide spiritual, religious or emotional support for patients, family and friends. You are welcome to use the hospital Chapel for some peace and quiet reflection. The Chapel is on Level 4 of the main hospital building.

Visiting

You may be given open access to visit your loved one; it may also be possible to stay with them if they are in a side room. Please discuss this with the ward staff who will help to ensure you are as comfortable as possible.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Due to current restrictions you may be required to wear PPE whilst visiting your loved one. This is for your safety. Please discuss with the ward staff if you have any questions or concerns.

Refreshments

Please help yourself to hot /cold drinks from the ward drinks trolley. The canteen may be unavailable at this time, but please do speak to the ward staff who will discuss with you any local options for food and drink.

What happens next?

When someone you have loved and cared for dies, it can be a very sad and distressing time. It is very natural and often helpful to express your feelings, whether they are of sadness, anger or relief. There may not be anything that anyone can say to ease your feelings of distress at this time. You may wish to spend a little time saying your goodbyes to your relative or friend. The staff can offer you 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 'Help for the Bereaved' booklet.

Further support and information is available from the Palliative Care team who can be contacted on 01935 384557 or palliativecare@ydh.nhs.uk. If you have any concerns or feel that your loved one is uncomfortable, please let the ward staff know.

If you would like this information in another format or a different language, please ask a member of staff.