

Palliative Care

What is palliative care?

Palliative [PAL-ee-eh-tiv] **care** is medical care focused on improving the quality of life for patients and their families, typically in cases of serious illness. A key focus is on managing pain and other symptoms, such as nausea or sleep problems. Palliative care also works to improve planning and communication among the care team (patient, family, and medical staff), and address emotional and spiritual needs.

Palliative care can be given at different levels:

- **Primary palliative care** is part of your regular hospital care. It's what your doctor, nurses, and other care providers do every day to control your pain and help you feel more comfortable. It can include talking about your diagnosis, your treatment options, and your plans for the future. It may mean finding emotional or spiritual support for you or your loved ones.
- **A palliative care consult** is specialized medical care for people with serious illness. It brings in providers with advanced training to partner with you and your other doctors and nurses. The team can provide extra support for treating complex symptoms, easing your physical pain, and helping you and your family manage the stress of hospitalization and illness. The back of this handout lists people who might be on a palliative care team.

Palliative care can be used alone or given along with treatment for an illness or one that prolongs life (such as antibiotics, surgery, or radiation). At all levels and stages, palliative care is about improving a person's quality of life and supporting their care decisions.

What do I need to do next?

- 1 Ask your healthcare provider if palliative care might be a good fit for your particular health situation.
- 2 Contact your insurance company to see if palliative care services are covered both in the hospital and at home.
- 3 Get to know the people on your palliative care team.

Is palliative care the same as hospice?

No, the 2 types of care are not the same. Hospice and palliative care both focus on quality of life, and a person receiving hospice services will receive palliative care (such as pain management and emotional support). However, hospice services are generally limited to end-of-life care.

These 2 types of care differ as follows:

- You can receive palliative care at any stage of life, and even for many years if you have a long illness. Hospice care is reserved for people who are not expected to live longer than 6 months.
- Palliative care can be given temporarily to people who will go on to recover. Hospice is specifically focused on comfort at the end of life.
- Palliative care may be combined with treatment designed to cure illness or prolong life. A person receiving hospice services does not receive this type of medical treatment.

What can I expect from a palliative care consult?

A palliative care consult in the hospital can support your care in all areas. The consult can take many forms, but in general, you can expect the following:

- **Team-based approach.** The team will include you and your family, your current doctor and care providers, and specialists in palliative care. The box to the right lists some of the people who might be part of your palliative care team.
- **Specialized knowledge and experience.** Palliative care specialists can address the more complex problems that come with a serious illness. They serve as resources for the rest of the team.
- **Improved coordination and communication.** As you probably know, a medical problem can make life complicated. A palliative care consult can help make your care, and your life, more organized and less confusing. For example, while you're in the hospital the team can help arrange for healthcare and other services you might need once you leave.
- **Alignment with your desires and priorities.** A consult gives you and your family a chance to reflect on your goals. It can also help ensure that the care you receive matches your current needs and values. Your palliative care team will never assume to know what kind of care you want. The team will talk in-depth with you and your family to make sure you are guiding your care at every point.
- **Focus on quality of life in all areas.** Your life is more than your medical problems or your treatment. From practical concerns to spiritual needs, a palliative care team can help you and your family feel less overwhelmed. This care allows you to focus on what's most important to you.

Is palliative care covered by insurance?

Many health plans, including Medicare and Medicaid, cover palliative care services in the hospital, but you should check with your insurance company. Ask about your coverage in the hospital and at home or in a hospice care facility.

Who is on a palliative care team?

To form your palliative care team, people with special training and certifications will work with you, your current doctor, and other providers. Each team member plays a different role, and you may meet with 1 or several of these specialists:

- **Physician specialist:** A doctor with specialized training in palliative care after medical school. This doctor can serve as a resource to your other doctors about the best course of treatment. They can help ensure that you understand your condition and are involved in your care plans.
- **Nurse practitioner or registered nurse:** This person may be the first person you meet on your palliative care team. This team member can help you set goals, arrange family meetings, make advance care plans, and any other needs. A nurse practitioner may have expanded responsibility for medicine and symptom management.
- **Social worker:** A palliative care social worker is licensed in social work and has the training to help meet the social and psychological needs of patients and families. They can also help coordinate care and manage transitions from one care setting to another.
- **Chaplain:** The chaplain's work focuses on spirituality, not religion, and on helping you and your family begin to find meaning in your experience. They are trained to support your nonphysical care.

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