

As Death Approaches: A guide to symptoms and comfort

Death comes differently for every person, and your loved one's death will be unique. However, there are changes that are common to almost all deaths. It may help you to know a little about what you're seeing, what your loved one may be experiencing, and what you can do to help.

Appetite and ability to eat and drink

Your loved one may not need or want much food or drink. This is a sign that their body is slowly shutting down.

What you can do

Here are a few things that you can do to provide comfort:

- Let your loved one choose when and what to eat or drink.
- Give ice chips or offer small sips of fluid that can be sucked from a sponge or a moist washcloth.
- To ease dryness, gently wipe your loved one's lips with a cool moist washcloth. Use a mouth moisturizer on their teeth and gums.
- If your loved one is on oxygen therapy, you can use a small amount of a personal lubricant, lip balm, or petroleum jelly on dry lips and nostrils to ease dryness.

Sleep

Your loved one will begin to sleep more and more. The sleep may seem deeper and it may be difficult to wake them. This change signals a slowing of the body's metabolism.



What do I need to do now?

While your loved one is dying, it might not feel right to take care of yourself. But being there for them also means taking care of yourself:

- 1 Schedule breaks away from the bedside.** Have someone take your place there if you don't want to leave your loved one alone.
- 2 Get outside every day, if only for a brief walk.** Fresh air can soothe and center you.
- 3 Eat regularly and focus on healthy foods.** You need good fuel during this stressful time.
- 4 Get the rest you need.** Leave the hospital or home for a few hours, if you need to.
- 5 Be true to your feelings.** Find time to cry, complain, shout — to express the intense feelings you may be holding inside. An understanding listener can help.

What you can do

Know that it is important for you to be there with them. Even if your loved one is asleep or can't talk, they know you are near.

- Note the times of the day when your loved one is more alert and has more energy. Try to plan visits and any activities for these times.
- Talk or read, play music, or sing quietly. Your loved one may hear your voice and find it soothing.
- Hold your loved one's hand, stroke their hair, or rub lotion on their hands. As your loved one fades, remember that this is simply part of the dying process, not a rejection. Your caring touch can comfort your loved one and express your connection.

Body temperature and skin changes

Your loved one's hands, feet, arms, and legs may feel cool to the touch. Their skin may get splotchy, grey, or dusky purple. It may be darker on the underside of the body. These changes are signs that your loved one's blood circulation is slowing down.

What you can do

- Provide blankets, socks, and slippers to help keep your loved one warm. Don't use an electric blanket or heating pad. The heat may be too intense for your loved one's skin.
- Keep in mind that even though the skin feels cool, your loved one may feel hot and want to kick off the blankets. In this case, don't insist on blankets. Do whatever seems comfortable to your loved one.

Bladder and bowel changes

Your loved one will likely have fewer bowel movements (poops) and won't need to urinate (pee) as often. Their pee will be darker and have a stronger smell. This is normal. As your loved one takes in less fluid and food, there's less waste. Also, their kidneys may be shutting down. It is likely that they will begin to lose control of their bladder and bowels.

What you can do

- If needed, use disposable diapers and bed pads. Change them when soiled to protect their skin.
- Ask the care team about any bladder and bowel changes. They can determine if a catheter or medication would be helpful.

Awareness and mood

Your loved one may become increasingly confused about the time, where they are, and who is with them. Some people even have trouble recognizing close friends and family members. They may even feel restless or upset. This is caused by changes in the body during the dying process, such as less oxygen to the brain, less fluid in the body, and lower kidney function. Medications can also cause confusion and anxiety in some patients.

What you can do

- As often as needed and as long as it seems comforting, remind your loved one of the day, time, surroundings. Speak with a gentle and easy voice.
- Don't try to "correct" your loved one. Don't argue or try to reason with them.
- Sit next to the bed and hold hands with them to provide comfort and reassurance.

As time becomes very short

In your loved one's final hours, you may notice that all of the changes listed above are even more obvious. Continue to give comfort in ways that feel right to you.

What you can do

As your loved one's breathing becomes more labored, you may want to raise their head and body with pillows. It may help to turn them partly to the side to help manage fluids. You may see these new changes:

- **Breathing changes.** Your loved one's breathing patterns may change. It may become louder, more ragged or gurgling, or sound like snoring. It's not distressing or painful to the dying person. There may be long periods between breaths, which is very common in the final hours of life.
- **Pale, bluish lips and nail beds.** This is a further sign of slowing circulation.
- **Half-open eyes and mouth.** Near death, some people's eyes remain partly open and look glassy. Their mouth may fall open.

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