

Saying “Goodbye”

It is important, both for yourself and your loved one, to take an opportunity to say “goodbye”. By this we mean saying or doing whatever you feel you need to that will allow you to let them go. It may be as simple as recounting special memories or saying ‘I love you’, ‘Thank you’ or ‘I’m sorry’. You will know what it is you need to say or do. This can be a very important part of the grieving process for both the dying person and their loved ones and can allow for a more peaceful death.

How will you know when death has occurred?

While the person’s breathing may have been irregular for some time, the gaps between breaths will gradually lengthen until the breathing stops altogether. The heart will also stop beating and their skin will become a grey colour. The eyes will be fixed on a particular spot, the eyelids slightly open and the jaw relaxed. This can be a very peaceful, yet emotional time. There is no rush to do anything at this time so you can spend as much time with the person as you need.

A health professional will need to be notified soon after death and they will provide guidance on anything else that needs to be done.

Remember – Nurses, doctors and other staff are available to help you work through your worries and concerns and to offer you care and support.

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Understanding the Dying Process



Family/whānau & carer information





Understanding the Dying Process

There comes a point in most people's lives when we think about death and dying. Perhaps we must face our own death or the death of someone close to us. It can be confusing and difficult because we do not know what to expect.

The information contained in this pamphlet is only a guideline and describes what may happen during the final stages of life. However, each person is unique and will approach death in their own way. It is therefore important that you discuss your loved one's condition with a health professional in relation to the information presented here.

Changes you may notice

In most cases, there are common characteristics or changes, which indicate that a person is approaching death.

These signs may come and go during the person's illness but become permanent as death approaches.

- Diminished need for food and drink
- Withdrawal from talking with people
- Fatigue
- Restlessness and confusion
- Changes in circulation
- Changes in breathing

Reduced need for food and drink

Initially, as weakness develops, the effort of eating and drinking may simply become too much; at this time help with eating might be appreciated. However, there will come a time when food and drink are no longer wanted or needed. This loss of appetite is a physical sign that the person is not going to get better, which can be hard to accept, as food and drink are closely associated with life.

What you can do to help:

The person's appetite will gradually reduce, but while it is still present, very small portions of whatever the person likes to eat or drink can be offered. However, there comes a time when it is unwise to continue to provide food and fluids as the person loses their ability to swallow. Spending time together is the most important support you can offer.

Fatigue

One of the first things you may notice is extreme tiredness and fatigue, which may be associated with certain times of the day. Changes in the person's body mean that they may spend a lot of time sleeping and tire easily. Sometimes there is a surge of energy when the person is more alert, may talk clearly and even eat their favourite meal even when nothing has been eaten for days. This can be understood in physical, emotional and spiritual ways and can be an indication that the person is getting ready to die.

What you can do to help:

You can continue to care in other important ways, for example, spending time together, sharing memories and news of family and friends. Weakness may result in a lack of response but simply being together can be a great comfort. Most importantly, being cared for in this way can enable people to feel that their lives have been worthwhile and that they will be remembered.

Restlessness and confusion

This can be distressing and is usually due to the physical changes that are occurring in the person's body. Sometimes, it is because the person is anxious about something or has 'unfinished business' that needs to be attended to.

What you can do to help:

Try to maintain a calm environment by limiting visitors, speaking in a quiet, natural way, gentle massage, softly playing their favourite music, reading to them and just letting them know you are there. Gentle touch and massage can be soothing. If you become concerned at any time, medication can be given to ease these symptoms.

Changes in circulation

As death approaches, the skin often becomes cool to touch, clammy and blotchy in appearance. This is quite normal and is due to changes in circulation as the body shuts down.

What you can do to help:

Although the person may feel cold to touch, they do not appear to be distressed by this. Use the amount of bed covers that you usually would. It may be comforting for you to massage their hands and feet.

Changes in breathing

Towards the end of life as the body becomes less active, the demand for oxygen is reduced to a minimum. This may be comforting for those who have had breathing problems as carers often remark that when a loved one is dying their breathing is easier than it has been for a long time. Occasionally, in the last hours of life, there can be a noisy rattle to the breathing. This is due to a build-up of mucous in the chest, which the person is no longer able to cough up. While this noisy breathing is upsetting to carers, it does not appear to distress the dying person. When death is very close (within minutes or hours), the breathing pattern may change. Sometimes, there are long pauses between breaths, or the abdominal muscles (tummy) may take over the work – the abdomen rises and falls instead of the chest. If breathing appears laboured, remember that this is more distressing for you than it is to the person dying.

What you can do to help:

Medication and changes of position can be helpful in reducing the noisy breathing caused by build up of secretions. While these measures may have limited success, it is important to remember that it does not appear to be distressing to the dying person. One of the most helpful things you can do is to keep the mouth and lips moist as they become dry very easily. Moistening the mouth with a damp sponge soaked in their favourite beverage and applying lip balm will bring a lot of comfort.