st michael's hospice

What to expect when someone enters the dying phase

Whether you're family, a friend or a carer, looking after someone as they approach the end of their life can be difficult.

There are some things that may happen which could come as a shock if you haven't experienced them before.

This leaflet will outline some of the changes that may happen when people approach the dying phase.

Although this is a collection of common symptoms that dying people experience, you may not see any of them or only see a couple of them. It will be different for everyone.

Loss of appetite

When a person is approaching the last days of their life, you may find that they want to eat or drink less. This is a natural process the body goes through.

Their appetite can also be affected by other symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, pain, memory problems, shortness of breath and constipation.

What can I do?

- Even though the person's appetite is reduced, you can try to encourage them to eat foods that are easy to swallow such as ice cream, jellies, or yogurt. Make sure they are in an upright position when eating. You can use smoothies or other nutrient-rich drinks such as Fortisip to replace meals where needed.
- They may not be able to tolerate sips of water as it might make them cough. You can try giving them ice chips or ice lollies to increase their liquid intake.

Mouthcare

Often when approaching the end of their life, people produce less saliva, they may not drink as much or may be taking medications that cause a dry mouth.

What can I do?

- You can use a soft toothbrush with some oral gel to help moisten their mouth.
- You can apply lip balm to their lips to stop them from becoming cracked.

However, do not use Vaseline if the patient is using Oxygen as it is highly flammable.

- Regular sips of fluids or ice chips can help in preventing a dry mouth.

Changes to bladder and bowels

Sometimes, in the last few days of their life, a person may not be able to control their bladder or bowels. This can be distressing for them, as well as for families, friends or caregivers.

What can I do?

- Speak to the nurses or carers involved who can help suggest ways to manage symptoms. This may include wearing disposable pads, a penile sheath for men, urine bottles or perhaps a catheter where appropriate.

Medication

When approaching end of life, people can have trouble taking oral medication as they can no longer swallow or might just be too drowsy.

If their oral medication has been stopped, there will be other ways of receiving medication to help keep them comfortable. This may be given by a syringe pump, which releases medication over a 24-hour period to help with pain relief, agitation, nausea and secretions.

Restlessness or agitation

In their last few days, some people can become restless. This may be because they are uncomfortable or in pain. Or it could be because they have difficulty passing urine or may be constipated, which may be a side effect of medication.

What can I do?

- The person may already have a syringe pump for medication to make them more comfortable. However, if they are still uncomfortable or in pain, speak to a member of the Hospice Team or the GP for advice.

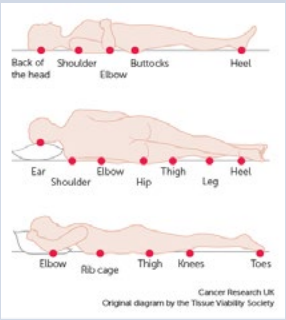
Changes to skin

You may notice a person's skin starts to change as they approach the end of their life.

Their skin may become pale or patchy with an uneven colour, or their skin may feel cold to touch, especially their hands, feet and nose.

As their body begins to slow down, their circulation is reduced. Their skin may become vulnerable due to the amount of time they are lying down, this can sometimes cause the skin to break in areas.

Here is a diagram of some specific areas to be aware of when looking for vulnerable skin.



What can I do?

- You could use barrier creams such as Proshield or Cavilon on affected areas to help protect the skin.
- To help prevent any damage, you can try to change their position every two to four hours, or whenever it is most manageable.

Sleeping

As a person's body begins to slow down, they will have less energy. They will spend a lot of time sleeping, or might be drowsy, or they may drift in and out of consciousness.

What can I do?

- Sit with them, hold their hand, speak to them, or play their favourite songs. Hearing is one of the last of the senses to stop, so keep talking to them as they will most likely still be able to hear you.

Changes to breathing

In the last few days, or even hours, of someone's life, you may notice that their breathing changes, or becomes noisy. This is due to a mucus build up in their airways, as they cannot cough to clear it. Some people call this the 'death rattle' but it is unlikely to cause the person any pain or distress, as they are often in a deep sleep or may be unconscious at the time.

What can I do?

- Changing their position every few hours may help.

What might happen when a person dies?

When someone is approaching the last hours of their life, they may become unresponsive to you. Their breathing pattern may become irregular with large intakes of breath followed by several seconds of not breathing. Their body temperature may change, and their muscles might begin to relax.

The time someone is unresponsive will be different for each person but could last several days.

If you have any concerns for anyone in the dying phase, please ring the 24/7 Hospice Line on **03301 272161.**

After someone dies, you may feel a mixture of emotions, even when the death is expected.

Everyone responds differently, you may feel sad, emotional, exhausted, numb, relieved, surprised, all of the above or none of the above.

However you are feeling, we are here for you. Please contact the Bereavement Team on **01424 456361** for more information about our bereavement services.

This leaflet has been produced by Erin, Trainee Nurse Associate, and Shelley, Health Care Assistant, from St Michael's Hospice.