

The Process of Dying

What to expect and how to help



PalliativeCare
VICTORIA

Living, dying & grieving well

About dying

Dying is a natural part of life. All of us will die one day. As with birth, it helps to prepare for the experiences of dying and death. The following information may be useful for the person who is dying, their family and carers.

Prepare

Preparation enables the dying person to receive the best care possible. It also reduces fear and helps with grief.

It is helpful to consider:

- what matters most to the person who is dying and their end-of-life care preferences, including their emotional, psychological, spiritual and cultural needs
- how they would like to be supported by family, carers, friends and others, including pets, as their life ends
- the physical changes in the body during the dying process and the relief and support available.

When death is near

With good care, the time before death is generally peaceful. There are changes that often occur in subtle ways over several days. The body starts to “let go” of life. There are changes you can expect when a body starts to wind down. These changes are a normal part of dying.

It is not easy to predict the time of death. This becomes easier in the last week or days of life.

It helps us all to prepare for dying and death.



Responding to changes in the dying person

Social withdrawal

It is common and natural for people to withdraw from social interaction as death approaches. They may speak very little, even to loved ones. This is due to a loss of energy to stay alert and to communicate.

Continue to express your love and care in simple ways.

Confusion

The person may become confused with time, places and people around them.

It helps to identify yourself before speaking. Speak normally and clearly. There is no need to "correct" the person unless the confusion causes distress.

Senses decline

Eyesight may decline. Soft lights in the room may help.

Hearing is the last of the five senses to be lost. An unconscious person may still be able to hear you speaking to them and other people in the room.

Appetite and thirst

The person's appetite and thirst may decrease and they may not want to eat or drink. This is a natural process and is not painful for the person.

Sips of water, chips of ice or frozen juice to suck, or a moist mouth swab will help. Trying to feed someone who is unable to swallow may cause distress.



Sleep and alertness

The person may spend a lot of time sleeping or feeling sleepy.

Allow them to sleep when they want to. There is no need to shake the person. When the person seems most alert, speak to them softly and naturally.

Body temperature

The person's temperature may rise and fall. Their hands, feet and legs may sometimes be cool to touch and, at other times, may feel hot and sweaty. Parts of the body may become spotty and darker in colour. This is due to the slowing down of blood flow and is a normal part of the dying process.

If the person feels cold, use light bedding to keep them warm. A fan and cool damp towels can help if the person seems hot.

Loss of bladder control

If the person drinks less, less urine is produced. The urine may become stronger and darker in colour as a result. The person may lose control of their bladder and bowels. This does not happen to everyone.

There are pads and special absorbent sheets available for hygiene and comfort. A rubber sheet placed under the sheets will protect the mattress.

Saliva and mucus

As coughing and swallowing slow down, saliva and mucus may collect in the person's throat, causing bubbling or other sounds. Usually, this does not cause distress to the person.

It helps to place the person's head higher and to one side, supported by pillows. Medications can be given to reduce the amount of saliva and mucus produced.

Breathing

Sometimes, the person's breathing may be very quick. At other times, there may be long gaps between breaths. Breathing may be shallow or noisy.

These changes are due to reduced blood flow around the body and a build-up of the body's waste products. This is not painful or distressing for the person.

It is helpful to place the person's head higher and to turn them on their side with pillows for support.

Restlessness

Due to the slowing of blood flow to the brain and other changes happening in the body, the person may become restless or "on edge". To calm down the person, speak in a quiet natural way. Lightly massage the person's hand or forehead, or softly play familiar music. Medications can also help.



Emotional Comfort

You can bring great comfort to the dying person by sitting with them, holding their hand and speaking in a calm and reassuring manner. Even if the person does not respond, they may hear you.

"I tell my mother I love her and the important things I don't want to leave unsaid. I hold her hand, stroke her hair and massage her feet. I love her by being beside her and comforting her."

You can create an atmosphere that is comforting and respects the dying person's wishes. This may include:

- Spending time being with them
- Special music
- The presence of a loved pet
- Fresh air
- A spiritual ritual.

For many people, saying goodbye is very important. Some ways you can say goodbye include:

- Sharing memories of good times – this can be comforting for everyone
- Saying the four things that matter most: "I love you", "thank you...", "I forgive you.." and "please forgive me..."*
- Reassuring the dying person that you and other loved ones will be fine.

Being with the dying person and simple expressions of your love can give great comfort.

*[Ira Byock, The Four Things That Matter Most: A Book About Living, www.irabyock.org]

Signs of death

You will notice that:

- Breathing and heartbeat have stopped
- The person cannot be woken up
- Eyelids may be half open
- Pupils are fixed
- Mouth may fall or remain open as the jaw relaxes
- Skin becomes pale and waxy looking.

After death

Before funeral arrangements can be made, you will need either a verification of death completed by a nurse or a certification of death completed by a doctor. The Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages requires a death certificate completed by a doctor.

What should you do?

Do what feels right for you and take time to do the things you want to do at this time. There is no need to rush. Your palliative care service can provide you with support at this time.

Talk with the palliative care team in advance about the involvement of family or friends in after-death care. They can also explain the supplies and assistance that will be needed.

There is no urgency for the body to be removed if it is kept cool. Family members and close friends may choose to wash, dress and prepare the body, or entrust the body to professional services.

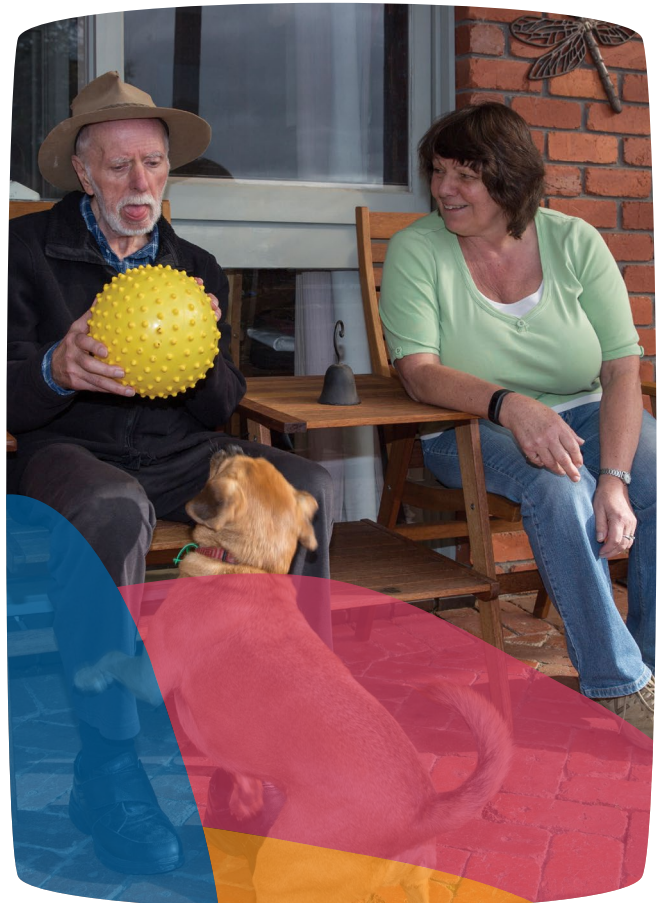
You can arrange a funeral or other ritual, or select the preferred service, to honour the dead person according to their wishes.

You can choose how you wish to be involved in the after-death care and services to honour your loved one.

Grief after death

It is natural to feel a wide range of emotions or even numbness when a person close to you dies. If it feels right, you may wish to express your feelings and to accept support from family and friends. You can also speak to the palliative care team or GP – they can provide, or refer you to, support.

Remember, you are not alone in your grief. Help is available.



Help is available

The dying process is different for every person and their loved ones. Not all changes will occur and they do not occur in any particular order. There may also be other changes in the dying person that worry you. Your needs for support at this time are also important.

Don't hesitate to ask your palliative care team and others for help at any time.



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Other helpful resources are available, including resources for carers. Visit our website or call us:

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