

What to expect in the last days of life



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When someone is in the final days or hours of life, their body gradually begins to slow down. This is a natural part of dying. Although it can be difficult to witness, many of the changes you may notice are expected and can be supported with comfort-focused care.

This information is for family members and friends of people who are approaching the end of life.

We understand this may be an emotional time, and some of what you read here may feel upsetting, but you don't need to read everything at once. You may find it helpful to come back to this information later, or to read it together with someone close to you so you can understand it and talk about it together.

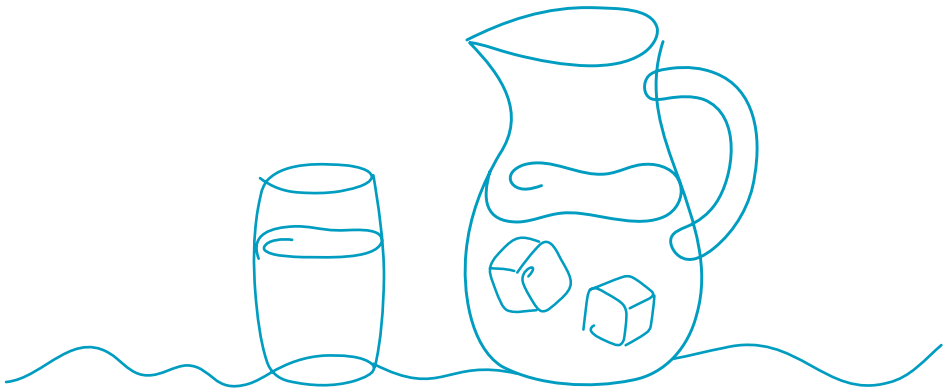


Common changes you might notice as the end-of-life approaches

Every person is unique. However, as someone nears the end of life, there are some common changes that often help us recognise that a person is dying.

Less interest in food and drink

- It's normal for people to eat and drink less, or to stop altogether, as the body no longer needs food or fluids in the same way. Swallowing can also become more difficult as the body slows down.
- At this stage, comfort is the priority. You can help by keeping their lips and mouth moist using a damp sponge or soft cloth. Some people find it soothing to suck on small chips of ice.
- Carers or visiting nurses can offer guidance and support with mouth care.



More time sleeping and gradual loss of consciousness

- As the body slows down, people usually sleep more and need more rest. In the last few days of life, they may sleep for long periods and seem less aware of what is happening around them.
- When awake, they are often drowsy and may not respond much or show interest in their surroundings. This is a natural part of the dying process and is not usually caused by medication.
- Even if they don't seem fully awake, they may still be aware of your presence. They may hear your voice or feel your touch, such as when you hold their hand.
- This gradual change can last for several days, although for some people it may be shorter or longer.



Changes in breathing

- As someone nears the end of life, breathing may become slower or irregular. There may be long pauses between breaths. This is a normal response to the body slowing down.
- Simply being close by can help ease any anxiety that may make breathlessness worse. Sitting quietly, holding their hand, or just being present can be very reassuring.
- Oxygen is not often needed or helpful in the final days, unless it has been used long term. Your healthcare team will advise if it's required.
- Sometimes, in the last hours of life, breathing can become noisy. This happens because saliva or mucus can build up in the throat and chest as the person becomes sleepier and their muscles relax.
- Although the sound can be worrying, it is not usually uncomfortable or distressing for the person. Gently changing their position may help. If you are concerned, contact your nurse or doctor for advice.

Confusion or restlessness

- Some people may become confused, restless, or agitated as they approach the end of life.
- Gentle reassurance and a calm, quiet environment can often help.
- Please let your nurse or doctor know about any changes, so they can assess possible causes and recommend how best to manage them.

Changes to the skin

- For people with lighter skin tones, the skin may become mottled or bluish, especially on the hands and feet.
- For people with darker skin tones, mottling may appear as darker patches, and a bluish tinge may be more noticeable on the lips, nose, cheeks, or inside the mouth.
- Hands and feet may feel cooler to the touch as circulation slows. This is expected and is unlikely to cause discomfort or distress.

Pain and nausea

- Pain or nausea can sometimes occur as someone is dying. These symptoms are often managed with medication.
- Please contact your healthcare team if you notice a change in their condition so they can assess and adjust treatment if needed.
- It can be distressing to see someone in pain or feeling very sick. Your calm presence can be comforting. Reassure them that you have asked for help and that support is coming.
- Think about what may have helped before, such as a change of position, warmth or cooling to an area, breathing exercises you have been shown, or gently changing their focus away from the symptom.
- These simple measures can make a difference. Your healthcare team can suggest what may be helpful in your situation.



How you can help

- Sit with them, hold their hand, or speak softly. Even if they do not respond, they may still hear you or sense your presence.
- Keep the room as quiet and peaceful as possible.
- Use soft lighting and calming music if it feels right for you and them.
- Try to care for yourself as well, and accept offers of help from others.

Let your healthcare team know how you are coping. They're there to support you too.



Who can help you?

You may be supported by several health and care services. Please reach out to them if you notice changes, have concerns, or need advice and reassurance.



St Peter's Hospice Clinical Advice Line (24/7)

We can offer clinical advice and talk you through what is happening and what you may need to do. We may also refer you to one of our teams or signpost you to other services for additional support.

0117 915 9430

We also have a Patient Guide, which explains our services and offers advice about bereavement. Please ask a member of the team for a copy if you haven't already been given one - we encourage you to read the guide when you feel able.





Sirona Community Nursing Services (24/7)

If you have injectable medication in the home for symptom management at the end of life, you should contact the community nurses. By this stage, you will usually already have been introduced to Sirona's services.

0300 125 6789

Remember, support is available for you and your loved ones. You don't have to manage this alone. Please reach out and allow others to support you during this difficult time.

There are many online resources available with plenty of additional information about when someone is dying, but it can be confusing to know where to look. We would suggest using trusted sources such as:

St Peter's Hospice
Practical Care
stpetershospice.org/practical-care



Marie Curie
What to expect in the last
days and hours of life
mariecurie.org.uk/information/end-of-life/last-days-and-hours-of-life



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