

# When death is near

Things to know, what to do

If you are reading this, it is possible that someone close to you is dying and you may be experiencing a whole mixture of feelings: loss, pain, anger, fear of the unknown (for yourself and the person who is dying), relief that their suffering is ending, and many more.

If you have never seen someone die you may be afraid of what will happen, but death for most people is very peaceful. Our information will help you make sense of your feelings, and to understand what to expect when someone is dying.

Caring for a person during their last weeks and days of life can be rewarding and challenging and stressful.

It may be that as your loved one gets more unwell you will wish to have the support of hospice staff and/or district or community nurses, as well as your GP.

It is important that you feel able to talk to them about how much you would like to be involved in the care of your loved one, and make any special requests about how they are cared for.

You can also discuss any religious or spiritual needs or specific wishes you have for your loved one.

You will already have a relationship with your GP, who can arrange extra support from the local hospice and community palliative care team.

The nurses and doctors should explain everything to you as they help you care for your loved one; do be sure to ask questions about anything you do not understand.



**Involve children and grandchildren. They cope very well with dying and death if they have honest, open communication about what is happening. Make them feel included and give them little jobs so they can help.**

## Learning series partners

View all resources in our series at

[www.carersair.net.nz](http://www.carersair.net.nz) or

[www.hospice.org.nz](http://www.hospice.org.nz)



If you are supporting someone who is very ill or dying, you'll find all resources in this learning series at [www.carersair.net.nz](http://www.carersair.net.nz)

## UNDERSTANDING THE DYING PROCESS

It is difficult to say exactly what will happen as everyone is different but changes will be occurring in your loved one and you may have noticed these. Such changes are normal as the body slows down in preparation for death.

- The person will have a decreased need for food and fluids and will have stopped eating and drinking before they die. It is important to not offer food when they become unable to swallow. Instead, moisten their mouths with familiar tastes; see our Oral Care information at [www.carersair.net.nz](http://www.carersair.net.nz)
- They will be more tired and sleep for longer. Sometimes they may be quite difficult to rouse. The best time to communicate with them is when they are most alert.
- They will not be able to get out of bed as they get weaker. Hospice or community nurses may help with many of their physical cares like bathing and toileting. You will be able to help as much as you wish and it is also alright to allow the nurses to do some of the cares.
- As the person who is dying consumes less fluid, their body will produce less urine, which will become darker and stronger. Many people worry about the person losing control of their bladder and bowels. This does not happen to all people, and if it does, there are special pads and absorbent sheets to keep them comfortable and clean.
- Your loved one's breathing patterns may change as they get closer to death, and sometimes they may have noisy breathing from secretions that build up as cough and swallowing reflexes slow down. This noise, which can frighten some people, is created by air passing over secretions at the back of their throat – it does not cause the dying person distress. Use pillows to support your loved one in a higher position. Talk to your health care support team if you are concerned. There are medicines that can be used to reduce the amount of saliva produced.
- If your loved one becomes unable to take their medicines, these can still be given through a little plastic needle under the skin. This will help relieve pain or any other symptoms. They may already be having their medicines through a pump, and this will continue.

## TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

For some people dying may take hours, for others it may take many days. There is no right or wrong way for a person to die. You and your family and whānau will go through it in your own way. Time at the end of life can be very precious; make the most of this time, as the memories will always be with you.

- Who else might be around to support you (other family members, or friends)?
- Involve children and grandchildren. They cope very well with dying and death if they have honest and open communication about what is happening. Make them feel included and give them little jobs so they can help; encourage them to draw pictures or write stories or letters for the person who is dying.
- Hospice or community team members can offer information and emotional support, and provide nurses or supporters to assist with physical cares for your loved one.
- Set up a roster so each family member or friend can spend time with your loved one; this will ensure everyone can have a break.
- You may not feel like eating regular meals, but try to eat when you can and have plenty of fluids.
- When staying by the bedside have a conversation that is appropriate with the dying person; don't be afraid to be yourself. Share memories, laughter and tears even if the dying person can't respond. We believe hearing is the last sense to go, so don't say things you wouldn't normally say to your loved one. Talk calmly and confidently to reassure them. If they are very sleepy or unconscious, tell them who is speaking to them.
- Create a soothing environment. If the dying person liked fun and laughter around them, they will like this as they are dying. If they are a quieter person, they will probably prefer a quieter environment. Have familiar things nearby, such as photos and favourite possessions. Music can be very soothing – choose music they like. If your loved one likes touch, massaging their hands, stroking their forehead, or holding their hand can help them remain calm.
- It is alright to have periods of time when no one is sitting with your loved one – just tell them you will be outside in the garden for awhile or in the next room. Take breaks even if that feels unthinkable. Whenever you leave the bedside say goodbye. Sometimes people need to do the final act of dying on their own.

## KNOWING WHEN SOMEONE HAS DIED

Breathing stops. No heartbeat or pulse can be felt. The person will not wake up. Their eyes may be partly open. Sometimes their mouth may be open.

## WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

You don't need to do anything or contact anyone immediately unless you want to. You may wish to sit with your loved one for awhile; don't feel you have to hurry. Telephone a friend or family member to support you. If the person dies during the night, you can wait until morning before you notify the GP or Hospice team, or call them straightaway (it's up to you). They will have discussed this possibility with you and helped you consider what to do. After your GP has seen your loved one and certified their death, you can contact the funeral director of your choice, who will help you to make funeral arrangements and take care of your loved one's body. If you wish to keep your loved one at home, the funeral director will discuss this with you.

## BEREAVEMENT SERVICES

Grief is normal and time allows us to adapt to the loss of a loved one. Talking about them with friends and family and crying from the sadness of their loss is normal. Be gentle with yourself during this initial grieving period, which may last for several weeks. If you would like some help or counselling to deal with your sadness, contact your GP or your local hospice or community palliative care nurse (if one was involved in caring for your loved one); they can provide contacts for bereavement services in your area.

## THE FUNERAL

You'll be asked to make various decisions about your loved one's funeral. They may have made arrangements already, or you might need to organise their funeral or ensure their wishes are carried out. For instance, what sort of service will it be, how long will it be for, who might attend or take part, and what kind of music will be played? Your funeral director will help you and your family make these decisions.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Who else needs to be informed about what is happening?
- What arrangements need to be made with your employer, if any?
- Do you have any medical questions for the doctors or palliative care team?
- Are you worried about your financial situation? Do you need help from Work and Income or a social worker?
- Do you want visits from the chaplaincy team or your own minister of religion?
- Does your loved one have a Will, and do you know where it is?
- Are there any thoughts regarding burial or cremation?
- Have you decided which funeral director to use?



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