

# Understanding what happens when someone is dying

Information for families and carers



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## **Thinking about the last hours of someone's life can be hard. But knowing what to expect may make things a little easier.**

This leaflet describes some of the changes that happen to people in their final days and hours. We hope it eases some of your concerns.

And remember – you can always ask staff at Prospect Hospice for help and information. Because we're not just here to help make your loved one's last moments as peaceful and comfortable as possible. We're here to support you too.

### **Eating and drinking less**

When dying, people don't need the same amount of food and drink as before, because their bodies can't digest or absorb it. Accepting this can be hard, as we instinctively want to nourish our loved ones.

Withdrawing from food and drink is a natural part of dying. You can help by moistening the person's mouth with swabs or lip salve.

### **Withdrawing from the world**

People withdraw from the world gradually. They may sleep more, become weaker, or appear to lose interest in their loved ones and surroundings.



Withdrawing from the world is part of the dying process. But it's natural to find it upsetting and frightening. Being there for someone, holding their hand or speaking quietly to them can be very comforting. Even if the person is unconscious, they may still hear you or feel your presence.



## Becoming restless or confused

Some people become restless or confused as death approaches. For example, they may see or say things that don't make sense. As well as keeping pain and other symptoms under control, the doctors and nurses can alleviate restlessness with medication.

Knowing you're by their side can help the person. You may want to talk to them, hold their hand or play their favourite music to help them relax.

## Breathing changes

People's breathing can change as they near death. That's because their bodies are less active and need less oxygen. You might notice longer gaps between breaths, or irregular and shallow breathing. Sometimes in the final stages, breathing can become noisy due to fluids building up in the back of the mouth or throat.

Medication and changing the person's position can help. But while this noisy breathing might be upsetting for you, it doesn't usually distress the dying person.

## The final moments

Before dying, a person's skin can become pale, moist, mottled and slightly cool. Their face and body may relax. Their eyes may become less clear, and they may become very pale. Eventually, their breathing will stop. Sometimes, there is a gasp a few minutes after what seemed to be the last breath.

You may find it reassuring to know that most people fall asleep and then die peacefully and comfortably.

## We're here for you

We know how difficult it can be to see someone you love and care for dying. You also may not know what to do and say, or how to cope. If you are anxious or concerned about the dying process, you can ask a member of staff to be with you and your loved ones when the time comes.

So please do come and talk to us. Ask questions. Discuss your concerns. And don't be afraid to ask for support. We're here to help you at this difficult time.

### Prospect Hospice

**President** HRH The Duchess of Cornwall

**Address** Moormead Road Wroughton Swindon SN4 9BY

**Tel** 01793 813355

**Email** [info@prospect-hospice.net](mailto:info@prospect-hospice.net)

**Web** [www.prospect-hospice.net](http://www.prospect-hospice.net)