

RECOGNIZING THE END OF CARE

In the final weeks of a person's life, they may experience a series of physical and emotional changes. Being aware of these changes will help you make your loved one more comfortable and prepare you to say goodbye. This list is not exhaustive, but is meant to help you recognize when your loved one is nearing the end of their life.

LONGER SLEEPING PERIODS

A person in the end of life may sleep for longer periods of time or have difficulty waking up. Visits from loved ones should be planned for when the person is more alert. Advise visitors to sit quietly and connect through physical touch rather than trying to wake the person if they are asleep.

CONFUSION

Your loved one may not recognize you or other familiar people, and may speak to people who are not present. Attempting to convince them that what they are seeing is not real can cause them further distress. Instead, gently remind them of the time, their location, and who is with them.

LACK OF APPETITE AND THIRST

Reduced interest in food and water, and difficulty swallowing, are common in those who are dying. Ask your loved one what they want to eat or drink, and provide them with small amounts of each at a time. Encouraging them to eat more than they are willing may lead to nausea or choking.

IRREGULAR OR WET-SOUNDING BREATHING

Dying persons often experience rapid, shallow breathing with pauses between breaths for several seconds. Saliva may also collect at the back of the throat, creating wet-sounding breathing. Generally, these changes do not cause discomfort. However, if you are concerned, contact their medical provider for suggestions on how to help your loved one.

UNRESPONSIVENESS

A dying person may become unresponsive to voice or touch, even if they appear awake. It may be upsetting to see your loved one this way, but try to stay calm. Explain what you are going to do before moving them, administering medications, etc. They are still able to hear you even if they cannot respond and your voice can be comforting to them.

BLADDER AND BOWEL MOVEMENTS

Decreased urine output and fewer bowel movements are common at the end of life, as is a loss of control over these bodily functions. Try to keep your loved one clean and dry. Protective padding may be needed, and you may consider asking a medical provider if a catheter would be beneficial.

ASK FOR HELP

If you are unsure if a change in your loved one is normal, reach out to their medical provider first. In an emergency, call 911. If they pass away under your care, call hospices or funeral homes for assistance. Calling 911 after death may lead emergency responders to attempt resuscitation, which can be distressing. Choose a funeral home or hospice beforehand so that you can easily find their number when you need it.

Caring for someone in end-of-life is both physically and emotionally taxing. Try to continue any self-care practices and reach out to others for help. Most importantly, spend as much time with your loved one as possible. Reflect on shared memories or simply sit at their side. Remember, your loved one can pass away in peace and comfort because of the invaluable service you are providing them.