

Understanding what happens at the end of life

Information to help you understand the dying process.



The dying experience is unique to every person – however, knowledge about the common changes to expect can help lessen natural anxiety and worry. This information covers four areas of common change that everyone experiences during dying.

Reduced need for food and drink

As a person approaches the end of life, they do not have the same need to eat and drink as the body systems gently

start to close down. Eating and drinking can become a big effort and whatever is eaten or drunk does not change the overall speed of deterioration.

It can be hard to accept this change, even when you know that the person is dying, as it is a clear sign that they are not going to get better. However you can still show that you care about your loved in a different way by understanding what gives them comfort and working with hospice teams to achieve that.

Things such as gentle washing of the face and hands, ice chips that melt in the mouth and lip salve may be helpful.

Lessening awareness of the world

It is natural for a dying person to gradually spend more time asleep, and when they are awake to show less interest in what is going on around them. If the person is happy to have visitors, it is helpful to let them know beforehand that the dying person may drift in and out of conversation and this is expected.

Worries about symptoms

People often worry about whether the problems they have experienced during the illness will be worse as they are dying. This does not usually happen. In fact, many medicines being taken before are no longer needed as the body systems start to close down. Many people worry especially about pain and feeling breathless.

As someone becomes weaker and less active, the body's need for oxygen becomes much less. The breathing systems start to close down and a person's breathing pattern may change. There may be long pauses between breaths or the pattern of breathing may become irregular.

Some people may have a noisy rattle in their breathing due to air moving through the natural mucus of the throat. This mucus is usually cleared by coughing, however a person who is dying is too weak to cough. The noisy rattle can be upsetting to people around the bedside but it doesn't appear to distress the dying person, who by now is deeply asleep (unconscious).

We can try to clear the rattle by changing a person's position or using medicines. Breathing usually eases as a person starts to die and people do not die fighting for breath.

We are also able to use medicines to lessen any worry or anxiety that may worsen feelings of breathlessness. At the end of life, any pain may already be well controlled by having palliative care. Our hospice teams will frequently ask about pain and look out for signs of pain in order to make sure a person is comfortable. In our experience, with good palliative care it is extremely rare for people to die in uncontrolled pain.

Other changes before a person dies

Some people can become more agitated as death approaches. If this is the case, then our colleagues will talk to you about it and, having ensured pain and other symptoms are controlled, give sedation to help relaxation.

The skin can become pale, moist and slightly cool just before death. Most people do not rouse from unconsciousness but die peacefully, comfortably, and quietly.

Supporting you

At Birmingham Hospice, together, we make every moment matter. So please talk to us about what is important for you and your loved ones.

If you have any questions or concerns about the information here, please speak to a member of the team.

