



**St Joseph's
Hospice**
Serving East London
and the City

What to expect in the last days of life



When a loved one is dying can be a very difficult time. This leaflet will try to help by describing some of the changes that you might see.

Hopefully it will answer some of your questions, and encourage you to ask for more information if you need it.

Eating and drinking less

We will encourage your loved one to eat and drink whatever, and whenever they like, as long as it is safe.

There may come a time when food and drink are not wanted or needed. As giving food and drink is part of caring for a loved one this can be hard for family members.

A loss of appetite and thirst is nature's way of helping the body prepare for a peaceful death. While it can be upsetting, it is often normal to receive little response when you try to give food or drink. Not eating and drinking does not mean a lack of appreciation of you.

If your loved one is too weak or sleepy to drink, nursing staff will give regular help to soothe and moisten the mouth – this is called mouth care. They will show you how to do this if you would like.

Becoming more sleepy

As time goes by your loved one may spend more time sleeping and be drowsy when they are awake. Some people worry that medicines cause this, but we see these changes even in people who have no medicines.

This is a very natural process, which can sometimes be accompanied by feelings of being peaceful. As your loved one slowly withdraws from the world they may become unresponsive. They may stay like this for a surprisingly long time (in some cases many days), but for others it may be shorter.

Changes in breathing

In the last hours of life there can be a noisy rattle to the breathing. This is due to a build-up of secretions in the throat or chest, which can't be coughed up anymore. Changing position often helps this. Medicines may also be used.

Sometimes these steps don't always work completely. Although the noisy breathing can be upsetting to hear, it generally doesn't appear to distress the dying person.

When death is very close the breathing pattern may change again. It may be fast, sometimes shallow or deep, and there may be pauses in between breaths.

If breathing appears laboured, remember that although this can be very hard to watch, for the person dying there is usually no distress. If you feel your loved one is distressed please let a health care professional know so they can review comfort and medication.

Spiritual and religious needs

You will be asked if you or your loved one has a religion or belief, and you may want to consider support either now, at the time of death or after death.

Not everyone who dies follows a formal religious tradition, and you may want to explore any values, beliefs or wishes that you have. Our chaplaincy team are available to help and support anyone, whether you are religious or spiritual, or not at all.

If you wish to discuss any aspects of this please let a member of staff know and they will be pleased to help you.

Individual care plans for the last days of life

Every patient who is dying has an individual plan of care. This is reviewed and updated regularly. The plan makes sure that the patient and their families receive the best possible care, communication and support. It also means that staff are aware of a patient's and family's wishes.

In the last days of life swallowing may become more difficult. If your loved one can't swallow we might think about giving medicine that they need by a syringe pump. This will be discussed with the patient and family. Medicine is always given at the lowest possible dose to make your loved one comfortable with as few side effects as possible.

Recognising when someone is dying can be quite difficult, and often this uncertainty makes things harder. Sometimes people who we think are dying live for longer than we think, and sometimes they live for less. Although this can feel confusing, knowing that this can be normal may make it easier for you.

About St Joseph's Hospice

St Joseph's Hospice provides care 24 hours a day 7 days a week to local people affected by life-limiting illnesses. As a registered charity, we rely on the financial support of our community to keep providing world class care free of charge to individuals and their families.

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This leaflet is reviewed by service users
Published October 2022

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