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Physical Changes at the End of Life

Every individual and situation is different when it comes to the end of life, but the body will usually go through some physical changes during the last few weeks or days. This is a general guide to help you understand those changes:

Emotional and physical withdrawal from daily activities

During the last few months of life, many times individuals will begin to step away or withdraw from many of the activities they used to enjoy. They may decide they do not want to have many visitors, or will tire easily when they do have company. They may need time to process what is happening with them and this is their way of coping with their illness.

Increase in sleeping

The individual may sleep more than usual, increasing the frequency of naps or sleeping very long hours at a time. There may be some periods where they will be very alert and talkative, and other times when they will just want to have quiet time. It is OK to just sit with that person and not have to talk. As they move closer to death, the time sleeping will continue to increase.

Decreased appetite

As the body begins to shut down, nutrition is no longer necessary and the individual may stop eating and drinking liquids altogether. This is often the most difficult change for many loved ones, as offering food is often seen as a loving gesture. Family members fear their loved one will starve to death or die of hunger or thirst. As the body shuts down, endorphins are released and there is no pain associated with the lack of food. Fluids can actually cause painful swelling and increase breathing problems at this stage. Keeping the lips moist with swabs or ice chips can be helpful and a way to help care for a loved one at this point.

Confusion or Restlessness

At times your loved one may seem very confused or even have conversations with individuals who are not in the room or have died before them. They may not recognize family or friends at times. They may also seem restless and fearful, picking at their clothing or experiencing physical agitation. It is important to speak in a calm voice and provide comfort, perhaps hold their hand and reassure them. Continue to talk to your loved one if they move in and out of confused or semi-conscious states, as their hearing is typically one of the last senses to be diminished at the end of life.

Breathing changes

Breathing may become very irregular. They may develop apnea, with long (10-30 second) periods in-between breaths, or it may become very noisy, with moaning-type sounds. Breathing patterns may also be affected by physical changes due to certain illnesses. Oftentimes breathing changes are very difficult for the family to endure and can be scary, but normally these changes are not uncomfortable for the person. Helping them change positions or raising the head of the bed can sometimes be helpful.

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Other physical changes

- They may experience a drop in blood pressure, and their pulse may slow down considerably. They may experience periods of hot and cold body temperature fluctuations.
- They may lose control over their bladder or bowel. It is important to reassure the patient that these are normal physical changes and there is no need to be embarrassed.
- Discoloration of the skin may occur. There may be grey or bluish areas due to poor circulation, or the skin may have a yellowish color to it.

Physical touch can often be very comforting or reassuring to the individual as their bodies begin to change. Gentle massage, brushing their hair or just holding their hand can provide dignity and support to the person.

Very near the time of death:

Generally within a few hours of death, the individual will be confined to his or her bed, sleeping a great deal and generally not eating or drinking any fluids. Purplish, blotchy areas may develop on the skin. Breathing may be somewhat labored, and have a rattling sound. Coughing may occur due to an increase in the fluid at the back of the throat and is a normal process.

They may have some time during the final days or hours where they have very lucid or energetic periods. Sometimes they will be waiting for a certain person or event before their final good-bye, and sometimes they want to be alone or think it will be easier on their family if they are not present at the time of death. Every situation will be different and each will pass in his or her own way.

At the time of death:

Breathing will stop, and the heart will stop within a few minutes of the final breath. You do not need to call 911. You should call the hospice nurse if they are not already there. Family may stay with their loved one as long as they would like. The hospice nurse can contact the funeral home and assist with other needs at the time of death. The hospice social worker and chaplain may also be called to be there for support as well.

*“Death is simply a shedding of the physical body, like the butterfly coming out of a cocoon.
It is a transition into a higher state of consciousness, where you continue to perceive,
to understand, to laugh, to be able to grow, and the only thing you lose is
something you don’t need anymore . . . your physical body.
It’s like putting away your winter coat when spring comes.”*
Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

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