What to Expect When Death is Approaching
A Guide to Common Signs and Symptoms at the End of Life

This handout shares common signs and symptoms your loved one may notice near the end of life. Knowing these signs may help you cope and learn how you can offer comfort to your loved one. Not all of these signs or symptoms appear at the same time. Some may never appear. Nurses, doctors, and other caregivers are always nearby to help you through this trying time. If you have any questions or concerns, let us know. We are here to help.

Signs of Approaching Death	What You Can Do to Comfort and Support
Greater Need for Sleep The person will tend to sleep more and may need help with simple tasks. This is the body slowing down.	• Watch for times when your loved one is more awake. • Plan to do things and to talk with the person when they are more alert.
Confusion/Disorientation Due to changes in the body, a dying person may be confused about time, place, and people. **Symbolic Language** Sometimes patients will use words that may lead family to believe the patient is confused. They may speak to someone who is no longer there.	• Gently remind the person of the time and day. • Let them know who you are and who is nearby. • You may wish to bring in a few favorite items like pictures, a blanket, or music. • A supportive presence is encouraged, and we suggest you listen to what is said as it can often be very meaningful.
Changes in Bowel and Bladder There may be less urine and it may change in color. Due to nervous system changes and weaker muscles, some people lose control of body functions as death nears.	• A protective garment may be used and will be changed often. • The nurse may place a catheter into the bladder to collect urine and to help avoid skin breakdown.
Changes in Skin Temperature and Color As circulation slows down, arms and legs may become cool to touch and/or darker or paler in color.	• Use light covers and gently turn the person side to side every few hours for comfort. • Heating pads or electric blankets should not be used.
Changes in Breathing There may be times when the person breathes very fast or very slow. They may not breathe for a few seconds to more than a minute. This is normal the closer they are to death.	• Raise the head of the bed or use pillows to prop them up. • Nurses may give medicine if the person seems uncomfortable.

Noisy Breathing/Congestion The person who is dying will probably drink less and may not be able to cough up mucous as well. It can collect in the back of the throat causing noisy breathing.	• Turn the person on their side or raise the head of the bed. • Extra pillows may help. • Nurses may use medicines if the person seems uncomfortable.
Changes in Hearing and Vision A person's senses aren't as good as the nervous system slows.	• You may want to keep lights on in the room during the hours they are awake. • Talk with your family member and explain what you are doing. • Show your feelings. • Say the things you may not have said yet. Encourage others to do the same. Include children and older relatives; they may want or need to say good-bye in their own way.
Restlessness and Anxiety The patient may seem restless and pull at the sheets. He may see some things you cannot see. This can happen as the blood flow slows and less oxygen reaches the brain.	• Stay calm and speak slowly. • Offer simple reminders of the time, where he is, and who you are. • Music may be calming and sometimes medicine may be used.
Changes in Pain As death nears, there may be an increase or decrease in pain.	• Tell your nurse or doctor if the person seems to be in more pain. • Ask for pain medicines as often as needed. People do not die from too much pain medicine. They die because the disease takes over the body.
Decreased Desire or Need for Food and Fluids The person you are close to may not take or want food or fluids as they need these less and may have a dry mouth.	• The loss of desire to eat and drink is a natural part of the dying process. • If the person can swallow, offer ice chips, use mouth swabs, and lip balm.

When Death Happens

When death happens, the person is not breathing and has no pulse, but their eyes and mouth may be slightly open. The person will not respond when you touch them or speak to them. If you think your loved one has died, tell the nurse. The nurse will call the doctor.

You may feel many emotions. These can include sadness, loss, anger, or relief. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Take the time you need. Nurses, doctors, social workers, and chaplains are here to support you during this time.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 6/2026 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#5361