



# **What to expect when someone close to you is dying**

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A guide for families, loved ones and friends.



## Introduction

You may be wondering what the dying process involves, what actually happens in the very last days and hours of life. The process is unique to everybody. It is not always possible to know that a person is in the last days of their life or predict exactly when someone will die.

There are certain signs that a person may be in their last days of life, or close to dying. Sometimes, these signs can come and go over a few days. If these signs go, it does not always mean that the person is recovering. Some of these signs can sometimes be upsetting or distressing. We hope this leaflet will reassure you that these are normal and not uncommon. This leaflet will also advise you where you can get further support.

## Signs that a person could be dying

### The person may not want to eat or drink

It is normal when a person is dying that they may not want to eat or drink. This may be because they find eating too hard, or swallowing may be become hard for them. If they stop drinking, they may have a dry mouth. Our staff offer regular mouth care to help them feel comfortable.

### What can you do to help?

If you would like to be shown how to help with mouth care, ask a member of the nursing team. You can offer small sips of water through a straw, if your loved one can swallow. The nursing team can advise you on this.

Some lip balm can also help people to feel more comfortable.

### The person's breathing may change

As a person enters the last days of their life, their oxygen requirements become much smaller, meaning their breathing can become quite slow and shallow. Sometimes there can be pauses between breaths.

When a person is in the last hours or minutes of life, these pauses can become longer before breathing stops altogether. This is a normal part of

**“I’ll be seeing you  
In all the old familiar places  
That this heart of mind embraces  
All day through”**

Billie Holiday  
I’ll be seeing you

dying; oxygen isn’t necessary at this time, although sometimes it can be used as a comfort measure.

Sometimes the person’s breathing can sound “wet” or “rattly” and is commonly referred to as the “death rattle”. Though this can sometimes be distressing to hear, it does not cause distress to the person and it isn’t painful. There is sometimes medicines the nursing team can give to help “dry up” this rattle, or sometimes the nursing team can change the person’s position to help.

### What can you do to help?

If your loved one is feeling short of breath and this is making them feel anxious, just being close to them **can offer a great deal of comfort and reassurance.**



A small fan or an open window can help too; you can talk to the nursing team about this.

### **The person may become much sleepier**

It is very likely that as a person approaches the end stages of their life, they will sleep more than they are awake. They may even appear to be very drowsy when they are awake. Some people can be completely unconscious for a few days before they die. This is all very normal; when people are starting to die, they become less engaged with the world around them but this doesn't mean they don't want to hear what is happening around them.

#### **What can you do to help?**

You can continue to talk around your loved one, and even to them. Talking in calm voices can help your loved one feel reassured and calm. They will be able to hear you are there which can be very comforting. You could try reading to them, or holding their hand. Even try playing some of their favourite music.

### **The person's skin may feel cold, or look different**

When a person is dying, their circulation can become weaker. Parts of the body, like hands, feet, nose, ears and other extremities may feel cool. Sometimes the colour can change a bit, and people may look very pale, or blotchy. This is a normal part of the dying process, and doesn't mean that the person will be feeling cold.

Sometimes people can get some swelling in their arms or legs. This

is also normal, and does not usually cause any pain or discomfort.

#### **What can you do to help?**

Putting socks, gloves, or an extra blanket on can be comforting. You don't need to warm them up, but this may help comfort you.

### **The person can become restless, or agitated**

This is common in the last days of life. People can sometimes get a bit confused, maybe not recognise familiar faces, or hallucinate. If your relative or loved one doesn't recognise you, it doesn't mean their feelings have changed. Sometimes, especially when people drift in and out of consciousness, they can struggle to interpret what's real, and what's not. It's a little bit like being half asleep and half awake. Sometimes agitation or restlessness can happen if a person needs to go to the toilet. Your nurse will be able to check this. There are lots of different reasons that restlessness or agitation can happen, and the nursing team will have a choice of medications that they can give to help settle and comfort people.

#### **What can you do to help?**

Keeping the environment calm, and peaceful can help. Speak calmly and remind your loved one who you are. You may need to remind them frequently. Try not to correct them when they get confused, this can sometimes make people feel frustrated or upset. Talk to your nurse or doctor if you are worried that your loved one is become more agitated.



**The person may not be able to control their bladder or bowels**

This happens as people’s muscles become very weak. They are unable to maintain continence in the way that they could before. Sometimes the nursing team can put a small tube into the bladder, called a catheter, this can help people to feel comfortable and maintain dignity, and also help to prevent skin from becoming sore. Sometimes the nursing team can use “pads” if a catheter is not suitable.

**What can you do to help?**

Speak to a member of the nursing team if you are worried that your loved one has been incontinent.

**Where can I get support from if I am struggling?**

Losing a loved one can be a very difficult time. There are lots of ways we can help; speak to any member of the St Andrew’s Hospice team if you feel you are struggling and they will talk to you about how best we can support you.

It is perfectly normal to feel this way, please don’t be embarrassed to ask for help. Your GP can also offer you support, or signpost you towards various support centres outside of St Andrew’s.

**Contact Information**



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If you have any comments or suggestions regarding this leaflet or you would like the information in a different format or language, please contact us.

