

Understanding Physical Changes

Because you are terminally ill, death has changed from an abstract concept of an event far in your future to something very real and immediate. This has surely been difficult to accept. As life draws to a close, you may feel vulnerable, frightened and concerned about what will happen next.

We hope it will help to know that HospiceCare interdisciplinary teams are here to listen, to honor your wishes, and to help you complete your life with the same grace and dignity as you have lived it. They can also assist you in understanding what might happen as death approaches. In addition, the following information may enable you to prepare for the time ahead.

What to expect now

Though each individual is unique, most hospice patients experience similar physical changes as life nears its natural end. These transformations can develop over many months, or occur in just weeks or days:

Changes in appetite and thirst—As you near death, you are likely to eat less and expend less energy. Your body's natural instinct is also to dehydrate. This makes it easier to breathe and prepares you for a more comfortable death. Please do not feel that you must eat or drink if you aren't hungry or thirsty.

Increased sleep—Metabolic changes now may make you feel more drowsy, take more naps and sleep for longer periods at night.

Restlessness or disorientation—Differences in the way your body processes, produces and supplies energy may also cause you to feel restless or confused. Your HospiceCare Team and loved ones will offer reassurance and help you reorient to your surroundings.

Decreased body temperature—As your circulation slows down, you may feel cooler. Blankets will help to keep you warm now.

Skin changes—End stage illness, along with decreased nutrition and fluid intake, can cause your skin to weaken and become dry and sensitive. Your HospiceCare Team and caregiver will help you change position frequently to avoid bedsores.

Breathing changes—You may experience a change in your breathing patterns, breathing more rapidly or slowly, or pausing between breaths. If you are also experiencing shortness of breath, talk to your HospiceCare Team nurse. Steps can be taken to help you breathe easier now.

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