

Understanding the Dying Process

Many older persons living in residential aged care facilities are frail and may also suffer from one or more long-lasting illnesses. As their illnesses progress they can affect the major organs of the body, including the brain, heart, lungs, liver and kidneys. During the last days of their life, staff and family members may notice that the resident's condition gets worse quite quickly. The changes during the dying process will vary from resident to resident with some residents becoming unconscious a few days prior to dying while others may deteriorate relatively quickly, or may even remain awake to some extent right up until they die.

Key messages

- It is almost impossible to give an exact time or manner in which a resident will die although there are common signs and symptoms that can give us a clue to begin to prepare for a comfortable death.
- The dying process will vary from person to person.

What can you do?

- Make sure you are familiar with common signs and symptoms that indicate death is approaching (see list below).
- Report to nursing staff if the resident seems to have any of the common signs and symptoms.
- If a family member asks you about what is happening to their loved one, it is OK to respond as long as this is within your scope of practice and you feel comfortable doing so. If you are unsure, tell them you will ask the nurse to come and speak with them.
- Make extra efforts to keep the resident as comfortable as possible – e.g. provide frequent mouth, eye and skin care; help with bladder and bowel care; and assist the resident to be as comfortable as possible. Watch for and report any new symptoms.
- Be aware of and respect any specific cultural needs, beliefs and customs relevant to the end of life.
- Continue to speak gently to the resident and reassure them that you are close by, even if it looks like they are unconscious.

Why it works

By understanding the dying process and the care required you will be better able to assist the resident to be as comfortable as possible up until they die. This care also helps the family to understand, feel included, and to deal with their loss.

Downloads

[Understanding the Dying Process](#) – clicking here will open a printable version of a brochure that outlines some of the physical symptoms and emotional changes likely to occur as death approaches and answers common questions about the dying process.

Related pages

[Being Part of the Care Process](#) – clicking here will take you to a video presentation (13 minutes) that highlights the role of the careworker in end of life care.

Relevant links

CareSearch – www.caresearch.com.au
Residential Aged Care Palliative Approach Toolkit – www.caresearch.com.au/PAToolkit

Common signs and symptoms associated with dying

Some of the common signs and symptoms that indicate that death is approaching can include the following:

- Rapid day to day deterioration where the resident's condition keeps getting worse
- Needing more frequent care
- Moving in and out of consciousness
- Finding it harder to swallow
- Refusing or unable to eat, drink or take oral medications
- Losing a lot of weight
- Becoming increasingly tired and very weak
- Breathing may become more difficult
- Becoming restless, agitated and confused

