

PROVIDING COMFORT AT END OF LIFE

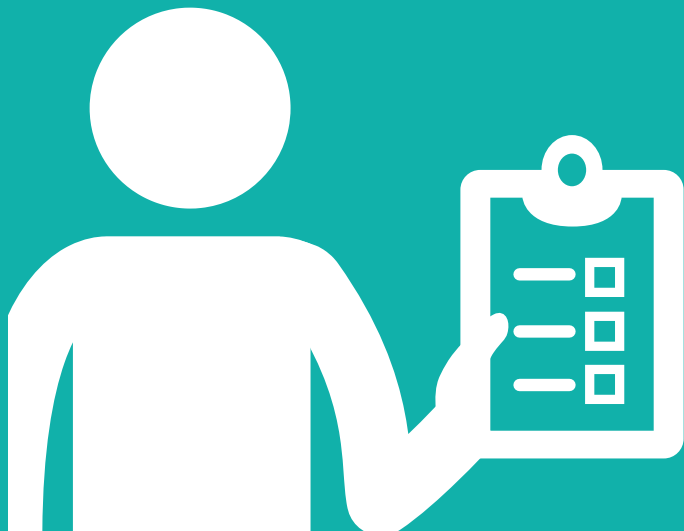
WHAT IS END OF LIFE CARE?

Comfort care is an essential part of medical care at the end of life. It is care that helps or soothes a person who is dying. The goal is to prevent or relieve suffering as much as possible while respecting the dying person's wishes.

PHYSICAL COMFORT

There are ways to make a person who is dying more comfortable. Discomfort can come from a variety of problems. For each there are things you or a health care provider can do, depending on the cause. For example, a dying person can be uncomfortable because of:

- + Pain
- + Breathing problems
- + Skin irritation
- + Digestive problems
- + Temperature sensitivity
- + Fatigue



MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Complete end-of-life care also includes helping the dying person manage any mental and emotional distress. Someone nearing the end of life who is alert might understandably feel depressed or anxious. Encouraging conversations about feelings might be beneficial. You might want to contact a counselor, possibly one familiar with end-of-life issues. If the depression or anxiety is severe, medicine might provide relief. The simple act of physical contact—holding hands, a touch, or a gentle massage—can make a person feel connected to those he or she loves.



SPIRITUAL ISSUES

People nearing the end of life may have spiritual needs as compelling as their physical concerns. Spiritual needs involve finding meaning in one's life and ending disagreements with others, if possible. The dying person might find peace by resolving unsettled issues with friends or family. Visits from a social worker or a counselor may also help. Many people find solace in their faith. Praying, talking with someone from one's religious community, reading religious text, or listening to religious music may bring comfort.

Family and friends can talk to the dying person about the importance of their relationship. For example, adult children can share how their father has influenced the course of their lives. Grandchildren can let their grandfather know how much he has meant to them. Family and friends who can't be present could send a recording of what they would like to say or a letter to be read out loud.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Here are some questions to help you learn more about what you might do to provide comfort to someone nearing the end of life.

Ask the doctor in charge:

- **Since** there is no cure, what will happen next?
- **Why** are you suggesting this test or treatment?
- **Will** the treatment bring physical comfort?
- **Will** the treatment speed up or slow down the dying process?
- **What** can we expect to happen in the coming days or weeks?

Ask the caregiver:

- **How** are you doing? Do you need someone to talk with?
- **Would** you like to go out for an hour or two? I could stay here while you are away.
- **Who** has offered to help you? Do you want me to work with them to coordinate our efforts?
- **Can** I help, maybe ... walk the dog, answer the phone, go to the drug store or the grocery store, or watch the children (for example) for you?



REFERENCES

All information sourced from the National Institutes of Health's National Institute on Aging and FamilyDoctor.org, a resource operated by the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP)