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### Notes

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### How we produce our information

All of our leaflets are produced by staff at The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre and this information is not sponsored or influenced in any way. Every effort is made to ensure that the information included in this leaflet is accurate and complete and we hope that it will add to any professional advice you have had. All our leaflets are evidence based where appropriate and they are regularly reviewed and updated. If you are concerned about your health in any way, you should consult your healthcare team.

We rely on a number of sources to gather evidence for our information. All of our information is in line with accepted national or international guidelines where possible. Where no guidelines exist, we rely on other reliable sources such as systematic reviews, published clinical trials data or a consensus review of experts. We also use medical textbooks, journals and government publications.

**If you need this leaflet in large print, Braille, audio or different language, please call 0151 556 5570.**

**If you have a comment, concern, compliment or complaint, please call 0151 556 5203.**

## Coping with dying

### Rehabilitation and Support

### A guide for patients and carers



This leaflet helps to explain the main changes, which occur before death.

The dying process is unique to each person but in most cases, there are common characteristics or changes, which help to indicate that a person is dying.

**The changes fall into three main categories:**

1. Diminishing need for food and drink
2. Changes in breathing
3. Sleepiness and other changes

## Diminished need for food and drink

As the body weakens, the effort of eating and drinking may simply become too much. At this time help with feeding might be appreciated if you are comfortable with this.

Your relative or friend will be supported to take food and fluids by mouth for as long as possible.

When someone stops eating and drinking it can be hard to accept. Your relative or friend may neither want nor need food and/or drink. At that time, a decision about the use of fluids – both food and water – through a drip, will be made in the best interests of your relative or friend. This decision will be explained to you and reviewed regularly.

## Changes in breathing

People who suffer from breathlessness are often concerned that they will die fighting for their breath. Yet towards the end of life, as the body becomes less active, the demand for oxygen gradually reduces.

Of course, breathing difficulties can be made worse by feelings of anxiety. But the knowledge that someone is close at hand is not only reassuring, it can be a real help in preventing breathlessness caused by anxiety.

Occasionally, in the last hours of life, there can be a noisy rattle to the breathing. This is due to a build up of mucus in the chest, which the person is no longer able to cough up. Medication may be used to reduce this and changes to how they are lying in the bed may also help.

If noisy breathing continues, it is upsetting but it doesn't appear to distress the dying person.

If the person is breathing through the mouth, the lips and mouth become dry. Moistening the mouth and applying lip salve will give comfort.

When death is very close (within minutes or hours) the breathing pattern may change again. Sometimes there are long pauses between breaths, or the abdominal muscles (tummy) will take over the work – the abdomen rises and falls instead of the chest.

## Tiredness and other changes

The person will spend more time sleeping and will often be drowsy when awake.

Try not to be discouraged if there is little response when you talk or squeeze a hand – this may be due to weakness, not lack of appreciation. Simply being together can be a great comfort to both of you.

This apparent lack of interest in one's surroundings is part of a natural process which may even be accompanied by feelings of tranquillity.

The skin can become pale and moist and slightly cool prior to death. Most people do not rouse from sleep, but die peacefully, comfortably and quietly.

Eventually the person may lapse into unconsciousness and this varies from a few hours to, occasionally, many days.

This is a difficult and painful time for you. You are losing someone you love and care for. It is often hard to know what to say to each other at a time like this.

Nurses, doctors and other staff are there to help you to work through your worries and concerns and to offer you care and support.

Loved ones may find it easier to support each other if they know what may happen during this sad and challenging time.

Please do ask one of the members of staff to explain anything you do not understand above, or if you have other questions.

