

Understanding and Dealing with Common Palliative Symptoms



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Pain

Pain may increase as an illness progresses. Signs that pain is making a person uncomfortable or distressed include:

- ◉ Facial signs, such as frowning, grimacing, or wincing
 - ◉ Groaning
 - ◉ Stiffening or resisting body movement when being moved
 - ◉ Restlessness or agitation
 - ◉ A bloated tummy
 - ◉ Vomiting, dry heaving, or repeated burping
 - ◉ The person tells you they are in pain.
- Pain is naturally unwanted and creates anxiety, but it can usually be managed well with the pain relief options available today. The aim is to take doses of medication that give constant relief. Taking the right amount of the right painkillers regularly is the best way to prevent pain, rather than waiting until the pain starts or increases. Extra doses can then be taken if the regular dose isn't enough.
 - Painkillers can be given in many ways, depending on a person's situation and preferences. For example, as tablets, syrups, suppositories, injections, or skin patches. As an illness progresses, it's also common for medication to be given through a sub-cutaneous injection. A small, very thin tube is placed under the skin and then taped to the skin. Medication is injected through the tube by a machine called a pump or a syringe driver. This regularly delivers very small amounts of fluid medication through the tube at certain intervals, avoiding the need for regular injections. The tube can stay in place for several days before it needs replacing. The healthcare team can explain this more.
 - Your doctor may prescribe morphine or other strong opioid medication. These drugs are the most common pain medication used in palliative care. Be reassured that their use for pain doesn't cause addiction or hasten death when used at the right dosage.
 - Other medications, such as antidepressants, steroids, or milder painkillers, may also be used to help pain relief, along with strong analgesics. The person may need to take more than one drug to control their pain. Different drugs work in different ways. When some kinds are used together, they can have a shared effect that provides much better pain control.
 - As well as their benefits, pain medication can have side effects. These might include constipation, nausea, vomiting, drowsiness, and confusion. Talk to the healthcare team about any side-effects that you notice.

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- Pain can become greater when a person is experiencing a lot of stress and emotional turmoil. Being able to talk to someone about their fears and problems may help the person more than medication alone.

Constipation

Ill people often get constipated because they're not moving around much, eating as normal, or drinking much. Try to avoid constipation because it may make other symptoms worse, especially pain.

- Some medications, like morphine, slow down bowel movements so people often need to take laxatives, which are medicines that stimulate bowels to get moving more. Encourage the person to take any prescribed laxatives regularly, drink plenty of fluids, and move about while they can. They may also like to ask the healthcare team about using some natural alternatives.
- Extra fibre will help people who are still eating fairly normally. Try vegetable soups and fruit (both of which can be puréed), wholemeal bread, or oat porridge. Some herbal teas can assist in relieving constipation as well. Ask the healthcare team for advice.
- Even when someone's eating very little, they should have a bowel motion at least every three days. It is important that bowel motions continue regularly. If they don't, suppositories or an enema may have to be given to help relieve their constipation.
A nurse can explain these procedures.

Nausea and vomiting

Nausea and vomiting may be experienced due to certain medications, some diseases, or other medical problems. The healthcare team will investigate the cause and may prescribe medication to help.

Things that may help include:

- Fresh air
- Getting rid of any smells that might make nausea worse for the person, like cooking smells
- Changing body position
- Sipping soft drinks like lemonade, ginger ale
- Sipping herbal teas such as peppermint or ginger tea
- Eating kiwifruit
- Sucking peppermints
- Taking anti-nausea medications as prescribed before meals.

Weakness and tiredness

Weakness and tiredness are common and frustrating symptoms of advanced illness which are difficult to overcome. Using tonics or vitamins won't help much. If the person is anaemic, blood transfusions may help for a while. Although, as the illness progresses, they may spend more time in bed or in a chair, it's still valuable to get up and move around a bit.

Conserve energy by organising daily activities in a way that leaves energy to do the things that matter and bring enjoyment. Prioritise the activities that are the most important. Allow for rest periods/days between activities or visitors. It may help to use a calendar to plan activities and rest days.

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Losing appetite and weight

It's common for a seriously ill person to lose their appetite. Eating less often leads to weight loss.

- Buying new clothes that fit, or altering ones they have, can help the person feel as comfortable as possible.
- If they have lost a lot of weight, they may feel the cold more than usual. Extra layers of clothes, a blanket, or more heating may be needed.

Confusion

Confusion or delirium may occur as an illness progresses. It might be caused by medication or changing body processes. A dying person may not always recognise people they know. They might misinterpret what's going on around them or what people are saying. They may have vivid daydreams, nightmares, hallucinations, or see people who are not physically present. They might become agitated or restless. They may try to do things they can't do any more, like getting out of bed when they need to go to the toilet. They may be in pain but be too confused to let you know.

- The healthcare team can help if confusion or restlessness becomes an increasing problem. For example, the person might have a full bladder that needs draining, or they might need medicine to make them more relaxed.
- Keep the person safe from falling or hurting themselves. Sit with them and talk about what they're going through and try to reassure them.
- If things are becoming too difficult, get in touch with the healthcare team as soon as possible.

Drowsiness

A person may become drowsier and spend more time asleep than awake. During this time, if they become a bit restless or more conscious, then it is time to change position. In the last few hours often there's no need to move them at all.

Insights from other carers

If you would like to see some whānau video stories that reflect Māori caregiving values at the end-of-life, visit *Te Ipu Aronui* at teipuaronui.co.nz/whanongo-pono-values

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When to call for extra help

It's always okay to contact the healthcare team or a local doctor (GP) when you need advice, help, or support. Write down their after-hours contact numbers in case help is needed during night hours.

Reach out for advice or help if:

- The person's pain has increased
- The current medication doesn't ease the pain
- Symptoms are becoming extreme
- A serious new symptom or side effect has started
- The unwell person is very distressed
- You are not coping well yourself with your carer responsibilities right now and need more support.

For more information and support for whānau-family caring for someone with a life-limiting illness, please view a *Hospice Guide for Carers* online at www.hospice.org.nz or ask your local hospice for a copy.



Hospice New Zealand

See other information leaflets available for Carers on our website.

www.hospice.org.nz

