What's Happening — A Timeline

The physical and emotional changes you may see as your loved one approaches the end of life. Every person is different — this is a general guide, not a script.

Months Before (1-3 months)

What You May Notice

- Less appetite — decreased interest in food, weight loss
- More sleep — growing fatigue, longer naps, less energy
- Withdrawal — less interest in activities, visitors, or conversation
- Increased pain or nausea — may need medication adjustments
- More infections — weakened immune system
- Emotional changes — introspection, life review, sometimes sadness or peace

What You Can Do

- Offer smaller, favorite meals — don't force eating
- Let them rest when they need to
- Respect their need for quiet time
- Talk to the hospice team about pain management
- Be present — your company matters even in silence
- Take care of yourself, too

> This is normal. Your loved one's body is beginning to slow down. These changes don't mean they're giving up — they're part of the natural process.

Weeks Before (1-2 weeks)

What You May Notice

- Sleeping most of the day — may be difficult to wake
- Stops eating — the body's way of preparing, not starvation
- Restlessness — picking at sheets, trying to get up
- Confusion — may not recognize you
- Hallucinations — seeing or talking with deceased loved ones (common and often comforting)
- Congestion — noisy, gurgling breathing
- Difficulty swallowing — pills may no longer be possible
- Vital sign changes — temperature swings, weaker pulse

What You Can Do

- Keep their mouth moist with damp sponges or lip balm
- Don't force food or water — it can cause choking
- Speak calmly during confused periods
- Don't argue with hallucinations
- Elevate the head of the bed to ease breathing
- Ask the nurse about liquid or sublingual medications
- Create a calm, quiet environment with soft lighting
- Play their favorite music softly

> Seeing deceased loved ones is one of the most common experiences at end of life. Many families find it comforting.

Days Before (2-6 days)

What You May Notice

- Bedbound — unable to get up or do any activity
- Skin color changes — bluish, mottled patches on knees, feet, hands
- Cheyne-Stokes breathing — rapid breaths, then a long pause, then rapid breaths
- Less responsive — may not react to voice or touch
- Eyes change — glassy, half-open, or non-reactive
- Decreased urine — output drops or stops
- Drop in blood pressure
- Facial changes — relaxation of facial muscles

What You Can Do

- Continue talking — hearing is one of the last senses to go
- Hold their hand — touch is powerful even when they can't respond
- Keep them warm with light blankets
- Gently reposition every few hours for comfort
- Use comfort kit medications as instructed by your nurse
- Say what you need to say — "I love you," "Thank you," "I'll be OK"
- It's OK to cry, and it's OK to just sit quietly

> These changes look alarming but are generally painless. The hospice team will visit more frequently now.

Final Hours (hours to minutes)

What You May Notice

- Death rattle — gurgling sound from fluid in the throat (sounds worse than it feels)
- Long pauses in breathing (apnea) — gaps grow longer
- Mouth open — jaw relaxes
- Cold, mottled extremities — hands and feet cool and purplish
- Eyes glassy — may not close fully

- Pulse very weak or absent at the wrist
- Terminal lucidity — a brief surge of alertness or clarity right before the end

What You Can Do

- Keep talking softly — they may still hear you
- Play their favorite music or read something meaningful
- Hold their hand or gently touch their forehead
- If the death rattle is distressing, atropine drops can help (ask nurse)
- You don't have to do anything — just being there is enough
- It's OK to step out — some people wait to pass until they're alone
- When breathing stops, there is no rush. Call hospice when you're ready.

> For most people in hospice, the final hours are quiet and peaceful. You are doing this right just by being here.

Sources

1. National Institute on Aging (NIH) — https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/providing-comfort-end-life
2. PMC — End-of-Life Signs & Symptoms (2023) — https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/
3. UCLA Health — Dying Process Guide — https://www.uclahealth.org/palliative-care/dying-process

Evidence-based resources for families navigating end of life