

When to Call

Hospice vs. 911

Knowing who to call — and who NOT to call — can prevent unwanted interventions and get your loved one the right help fast.

CALL HOSPICE

Your hospice number — available 24/7

- Uncontrolled pain — medications aren't working, or pain is getting worse
- New or worsening symptoms — fever, vomiting, bleeding, new confusion
- Breathing changes — shortness of breath, noisy breathing, long pauses
- Falls — even if they seem OK, the nurse needs to assess
- Medication questions — "Can I give another dose?" "It's not working" "I spilled it"
- Comfort kit is running low — the nurse can arrange refills
- Equipment problems — hospital bed, oxygen, suction machine
- You're not sure what's happening — if something feels wrong, call. That's what they're there for.
- You're overwhelmed — they can send help, arrange respite, or just talk you through it
- After death occurs — call hospice first. There is no rush. The nurse will come to you.

DO NOT CALL 911

Unless there is a safety emergency unrelated to the illness

- When death occurs — paramedics are legally required to attempt resuscitation. Call hospice instead.
- When they stop eating or drinking — this is expected. The hospice team is managing it.
- When breathing changes — irregular breathing, pauses, and the "death rattle" are part of the dying process.
- When they become unresponsive — this is a natural progression. Call your nurse, not 911.
- When they have a fall (unless you suspect a broken bone you can see) — call hospice for assessment.

- When they seem confused or agitated — this is terminal restlessness. Your nurse has medications for this.

Why this matters

If you call 911, paramedics must follow emergency protocols — which may include CPR, intubation, and transport to the ER. These interventions can cause suffering and go against your loved one's wishes. Your hospice team is trained for exactly these situations.

EXCEPTIONS — When 911 IS Appropriate

- Fire or gas leak in the home
- Caregiver medical emergency — if YOU are having a heart attack, stroke, or medical crisis
- Violence or intruder — a safety threat to anyone in the home
- Natural disaster — flood, tornado, or structural collapse

These are emergencies where the patient's hospice status is not relevant. In these cases, call 911 AND your hospice team.

Write your hospice number here and put it on the fridge:

Hospice #: _____

Sources

1. NHPCO — <https://www.nhpco.org/>
2. National Institute on Aging (NIH) — <https://www.nia.nih.gov/>
3. AAHPM — <https://aahpm.org/>

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