

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>

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Evidence-based resources for families navigating end of life