How can I help reduce healthcare associated infections?

Infection control is important to the well-being of our patients and for that reason we have infection control procedures in place. Keeping your hands clean is an effective way of preventing the spread of infections. We ask that you, and anyone visiting you, use the hand sanitiser available at the entrance to every ward before coming in to or after leaving the ward. In some situations hands may need to be washed at the sink using soap and water rather than using the hand sanitiser. Staff will let you know if this is the case.

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What to expect when someone is close to death

Florence Nightingale Hospice
Patient Information leaflet

If you require a translation or an alternative format of this leaflet please call 01296 332600
Introduction

This leaflet explains some of the physical changes that may occur before death.

Many people worry about what changes to expect when someone is close to death. For some people, having more detailed information about what to expect will help them to understand what might happen, and will thus reduce their anxiety.

However, you may still have questions after reading this information, or simply want to be able to talk this through in person. Please do not hesitate to ask your Health Professional who will be happy to answer your questions and to support you throughout this time.

Changes That Can Occur Before Death

Everyone is unique but when someone has a life-limiting illness, there are some common symptoms and changes that help to indicate that they may be reaching the end of their lives.

However these symptoms may also be a sign of other conditions, so it is important to report any changes to your Doctor or other Health Professional.

These may include:

Reduced Interest In Eating And Drinking

As people approach the end of their life and become weaker, the desire to eat and to drink reduces. This can sometimes be because eating requires too much energy. Small, easily-digested meals may help, together with giving help with feeding.
However, there will come a time when the desire and need for food and drink stops altogether and the person may become unable to swallow.

This can be difficult for families and carers, as we associate eating food and drinking will help our loved ones get better. We believe that providing food for our loved one is an important part of caring and we also worry that they may become dehydrated.

However, it is a normal part of the dying process that people will only be able to manage very small amounts of fluids and will eventually stop drinking altogether.

At this time, your loved one may get a dry mouth, and this can be relieved by gently moistening their mouth with a small sponge on a stick. Your Healthcare Professional can provide these and will show you how to use them.

If the person still needs to take medicines at this time then these can be given either as injections or via a syringe pump.

**Withdrawing From The World**

Over time, dying people become more drowsy and may spend more time asleep than awake. They will have little energy, and may take less interest in what is going on around them and those around them. This is not a snub but is because of their low energy levels.
Eventually, the person may be unable to communicate and may become unconscious. We believe, at this time, that people can still hear, so talking to them or playing their favourite music may be comforting for them.

**Changes In Breathing**

People who are short of breath are naturally very worried that, as they are dying, they will die fighting for breath. However, as death approaches, the body becomes less active and needs less oxygen.

As you are probably already aware breathing can be made worse by anxiety, so the knowledge that a loved one is close at hand can be comforting. If needed, medicines are available which can help with the anxiety.

In the last few days or hours of life, the breathing pattern may change and sometimes long gaps between breaths can occur. You may hear a noisy rattle when the person breathes. This is the moisture in our lungs which we need to be able to absorb oxygen. When we become immobile and weak, we are unable to cough effectively and so moisture or mucus can build-up and it is this which causes the ‘rattling’ sound.

When needed, medication can be used to reduce the amount of mucus produced and changing the person’s position may also help.

Sometimes however, once the mucus has built-up, these measures do not relieve the problem completely. Usually, noisy breathing does not distress the dying person, but it can be upsetting for loved ones and carers.

When people are dying they often breathe through their mouth, causing their mouth and lips to become dry. Moistening the mouth with a small sponge on a stick and applying Lip balm or soft paraffin wax can help to soothe the dry lips.

**Changes In Appearance**

There may also be changes which occur to the person’s skin near the end of life. It can become pale, moist and slightly cool before death. There may also be colour changes apparent, especially on the arms and legs.

**Changes In Behaviour**

Sometimes, in the last few days of life, people may become muddled and confused. This is a normal part of the dying process. If necessary, they can be given some medicines to help with this. However, most people become increasingly sleepy and die very peacefully.