



Tips for Careworkers: Signs of Imminent Death

What it is: Imminent death means that the older person is likely to die in the coming hours, days or weeks.

Why it matters: Recognising when death is near is important because it allows the older person to spend time with their friends and family of choice if that is their wish. It also alerts their health care team to the need for terminal care.

What I need to know: The signs of imminent death include:

- weakness - totally bed-bound and requiring extensive nursing care
- sleepy and not responding to sound or touch
- difficulty with swallowing or inability to swallow
- reduced eating and drinking
- reduced or no urine output
- changes in breathing pattern including noisy breathing or very long pauses between breaths
- skin that is cool to touch.

Communication from the older person may not be possible. Look for signs such as agitation, restlessness, facial expression, body posture and changes in breathing.

Care should continue with cultural and spiritual needs respected.

Do Let your nursing/supervisory staff know if you notice any of the signs of imminent death.

Do Continue to care for the person and make sure that family know that death is likely so that they can say goodbye.

Do Listen to any concerns and opinions of the family and let nursing/supervisory staff know of these.

Do Offer emotional support appropriate to the older person's needs and preferences.

Do Continue to talk calmly with the person and let them know what you are doing - hearing is believed to be the last sense to be lost.

Name:

My reflections:

What signs should I look for that might mean a person is likely to die soon?

Who should I speak with if I think a person in my care is approaching death?

My notes:

See related palliAGED Practice
Tip Sheets:
Distress at the End of Life
Recognising Deterioration
Spiritual Care

For references and the latest version of all Tip Sheets visit
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