

# Basic instructions before leaving Earth

*This handout explains what to expect from the natural process of dying, and how your helpers can take care of you during this time.*

The process of dying makes you feel exhausted and weak. You become sleepier and sleepier, until you may not be able to even raise your head from the pillow or lift up your hand.

During this time, it is common for people to lose interest in the things that were previously very important to them. You may not feel any desire to communicate with anybody any more.

You increasingly drift in and out of a state that is like a deep sleep.

You are likely to have waking dreams, and at times not recognize the familiar things and people around you, even though you may be aware that they are there. The drowsiness and confusion are due to the chemical changes that are happening in the body.

Your helpers may be unsure as to whether you are able to hear them or know they are there. It is safest to assume that you may be hearing them, without feeling the need to respond to them.

For this reason, they should guard what goes on in your room, for example, not leaving the television on, but instead playing quiet music; not allowing people in wearing heavy perfume or cologne, but paying attention to everything a person could perceive with all the senses.

Your senses may at times be very heightened, so all stimuli - sound, smell, and touch - should be soft and gentle.

Sometimes a dying person stays awake and aware until very close to the end, but, this is the exception rather than the rule.



## **Nourishment:**

Your body will stop using food calories for metabolism. Your appetite will go away, and you will forget about eating. Even if you were to take food by mouth or get IV nourishment, your body loses the ability to use it for energy.



As metabolism slows down, you develop higher levels of ketones in the blood, which have a mood elevating effect and decrease feelings of discomfort.

## **Fluids:**

You will lose your sense of thirst. Once a person stops drinking, they usually only live for a few days. Dehydration causes an endorphin release that may heighten a feeling of peaceful calm.

You will not need IV fluids when you are in the dying process. They can cause fluid overload, when your body is no longer using

hydration for metabolism. This would worsen swelling, and could cause difficulty breathing. Your health conditions alone could also cause increased swelling.

As you stop absorbing fluids, you won't make as much urine. However, fatigue and sleepiness can make you accidentally lose urine and not be able to control your bowels. It will help to lie on a pad or

wear an adult garment, with frequent cleaning to protect your skin from discomfort.

Occasionally, chemical changes can cause perspiring.

#### **Skin care:**

Your skin becomes cool to the touch and may change color, mottling as your blood circulation slows down. Skin can also become more sensitive to the touch. Your helpers need to touch you gently.

You could get sores where the skin is thin.

This can be minimized by being gently turned every hour or two. Your helpers can lift up on the sheet, to help you roll onto your other side. They can gently put lotion on the skin over bony prominences (hips, backbone, heels, elbows).

When you are too fatigued to move around any more, your joints may get sore, if they are not gently moved for you every hour or two. Your helpers will gently flex and comfortably reposition your limbs.

#### **Eye care:**

It can be hard to shut your eyes, and they can get dry, due to shrinkage of the tissues as metabolic processes slow down. If your eyes can't close, your helpers will apply a lubricating eye gel every 4 hours or so, and/or saline eyedrops every hour or two, so your eyes don't feel uncomfortably dry.

#### **Mouth care:**

When you're no longer taking fluids by mouth, your mouth should be moistened every hour or two, with a dilute salt water-baking soda solution - no saltier than tears - on a swab, and a little lip balm on the lips. For most humans of all ages, having the lips touched is a comforting sensation.

#### **Breathing:**

You will stop swallowing saliva, and secretions can pool in the throat, causing noisy breathing or a groaning sound that you aren't even aware of. It is not uncomfortable. However, suctioning is not helpful, does not solve the problem, and can be very uncomfortable. Your helpers will turn you onto your side or slightly face-down, to prevent as much noise from occurring.

If your health condition is making it difficult to breathe normally, this also is often less uncomfortable at the end of life. This is because the buildup of carbon dioxide in the blood causes "CO2 narcosis," which is a calm, sleepy state.

#### **About pain:**

It is a myth that uncontrollable pain suddenly develops during the last hours of life when it has not previously been a problem.

If you do have increased pain from your health condition, your helpers can recognize it by changes in your vital signs - for example, the heart rate and blood pressure increasing, and then decreasing again when pain medicine is given.

If you are moving around and making sounds in response to dreams and visions, your helpers should not assume that it is because of pain, unless they can see that your vital signs are also changed.

Giving too much pain medicine can cause side effects that make dying more difficult rather than less.



Your helpers will need to carefully adjust all dosages, so as not to overload you accidentally, as your kidneys and liver slow down.

The same is true of the other medicines you used to take. Most of them are no longer necessary. Only medicines that help with your symptoms should be continued.

### **Agitated states:**

Sometimes the chemical changes in the body can cause neurological responses that make dying very difficult for your helpers to witness.

In an agitated state, these neurological changes progress from restlessness, with groaning and mumbling and moving about, through spells of delirium, and even into jerks and seizures (which are like "electrical storms" of the brain).

Again, there's no evidence that these states are frightening or painful, although they can be very confusing for people to witness. If your helpers do not understand what they are seeing, they may believe that you were in terrible pain, or that you were unhinged by drugs you were given.

However, again, these changes are due to chemical changes in the body, and are not known to be uncomfortable for the person who is experiencing them. Anti-seizure medication, like Valium, which also is an anti-anxiety medication, can be given if desired.

Most people do not become agitated when nearing death. They simply become more and more sleepy, drifting in and out of dreams, until they do not respond at all.

For most people, the final moments of life are very peaceful. Their breathing slows down and becomes more irregular, and then stops. This can take a long time, or it can happen over a few minutes. Sometimes it is hard to determine the exact moment of death.



### **Signs of death**

for your helpers to notice:

- the heartbeat and breathing stop;
- the skin becomes pale and cool as the blood settles;
- the muscles relax, the jaw may fall open, and urine and stool may be released;
- they may hear a trickling of fluids internally (mouth and throat secretions draining with gravity).



In traditional Tibetan Buddhism, a set of instructions called the *Bardo Thodol* ("Liberation Through Hearing") is read out loud to the dying person. It includes the following words:

*"Noble one, abandon suffering! ...Don't be afraid or shocked.*

*It seems that you are losing consciousness. Outer appearances resemble the sky at dawn.*

*Inner experience resembles a butter lamp in a vase.*

*Remain one-pointedly in the clarity of non-thought. This luminosity of death is buddha mind itself.*

*Rest naturally without fabricating or distorting anything.*

*Noble one, in this way you will be liberated."*

**There is nothing to fear**, because as death nears, your fear and worry will fall away by themselves.

# Important tasks checklist

## Before the dying process:

Establish your Advance Directives, which include declaring a Healthcare Power of Attorney (someone who can make medical decisions on your behalf if you are unable to) and stating what care you do or don't wish to receive. At [www.caringinfo.org](http://www.caringinfo.org), you can download your state's official Advance Directive form. If you don't have time or resources to do this, you can hand-write a document stating:

1. **Who would make medical decisions for you** if you were unable to do so, as your "durable healthcare power of attorney - and what their contact information is. (You may not appoint your doctor.) If possible, obtain that person's permission, as it is a big responsibility that could possibly place them in conflict with others who disagree with your wishes. Discuss your Advance Directives with that person.

2. **Whether you would or wouldn't want**, under the following circumstances: If you were permanently unconscious; if you were close to death; if you had an advanced terminal illness and were unable to participate in your own care for yourself or communicate; or if medical care would cause permanent and severe suffering:

Comfort care (including pain and anxiety medication, oxygen, and other measures that ease, but don't prolong, dying)

Tube feeding (a tube in the nose or surgically implanted in the abdomen)

Life support (a breathing machine with a tube in the throat or a tracheostomy, with or without sedation)

Resuscitation/CPR when the heart or breathing stop (including pushing and electric shocks to the chest, and injected medications - all of which usually cause pain - usually without saving life, when a person is already near death)

3. **What you desire to have done with your body** after death. If you are an organ donor, contact your state's organ donation organization to find out what contact information and instructions need to be included. In Oregon, this is [www.donatelifenw.org](http://www.donatelifenw.org). If you have special instructions (e.g., cremation), specify them in your Advance Directive.

Designate someone as your "durable financial power of attorney," who can make legal and financial decisions for you when you are unable to. If possible, obtain that person's permission, as it is a big responsibility that could possibly place them in conflict with others who disagree with your wishes. Discuss your legal and financial plans with that person. At death, the power of attorney ends and your last will and testament takes over.

Prepare your legal last will and testament, by visiting your lawyer, or by writing it up using guidebooks available from your public library or online (e.g., [www.doyourownwill.com](http://www.doyourownwill.com)).

If you have messages for loved ones or others to be delivered after death, compose them now, and note in your will or advance directives where these messages may be found. There are also online services that will deliver messages for you, on dates you specify (e.g., [www.thedigitalbeyond.com](http://www.thedigitalbeyond.com)).



## After death:

Call the doctor and/or hospice to legally certify that the death has been completed. Tell them you will need 10-20 copies of the death certificate, for use in the official and financial processes.

Call any clergy or support people.

For help with care of the body, immediately contact your preferred funeral home (see [www.greenburialcouncil.org](http://www.greenburialcouncil.org) to find home and green funeral services). Note: a funeral home is not required unless you live in CT, IN, LA, MI, NE, or NY. [In Oregon, if a body is held longer than 24 hours without embalming, it must be refrigerated at 36F or less, but can be unrefrigerated for 6 hours at a time (e.g., for transport or funeral, etc.). A person who died from a communicable disease might be required to have embalming or a sealed casket, to prevent contagion. Caskets are not otherwise required by law. You can bury someone on land you own. It is legal to scatter or inter ashes on public land or water, or land or water that you own; they are harmless.]

Call your local newspaper to publish an official death notice or obituary, which is needed for some legal proceedings.

Contact the person's lawyer and any people who had power of attorney for the person.

Contact any agencies that provided or will provide benefits, like Social Security, the VA, life insurance agent, etc.

End accounts as necessary, like credit cards, utilities, social networking sites, subscriptions, insurances, etc.

Gather up all important papers and keep them in a special file in a safe place for later use, for example for any unpaid bills, final tax return, outstanding claims, etc.