

*Information for  
Caregivers*

*When an Expected  
Death Occurs  
at Home*

What to expect,  
what to do



Health and  
Social Services

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## What to expect

The patient will go through a number of physical changes as his or her body “slows down” and prepares for the final stages of life.

The following list of changes is presented in the order in which they usually appear. Please remember, each situation is different, and not all of these signs and symptoms occur in all patients.

By reading about the changes, you will be better prepared for them if they occur. Knowing that they are a normal part of the process may make your situation a little more manageable.



## **When someone is dying...**

**They may sleep longer and sometimes have difficulty waking up.**

What to do:

- Talk with the patient when he or she is more awake and alert;
- keep visiting times brief, or encourage visitors to sit quietly at the bedside.

**They may have less of an appetite.**

What to do:

- Offer small servings of light food;
- decrease portion size.

**They may become confused and unable to recognize familiar people or surroundings.**

What to do:

- Speak calmly and naturally;
- remind the patient of the time, the place, and who is in the room.

**They may become restless, pull at bed linen and clothing, and may “see” things.**

What to do:

- Give reassurance;
- avoid physical restraint, if possible;
- playing soothing music or giving a gentle massage may ease a restless patient;
- contact your doctor if home safety is a concern.

**They may have difficulty swallowing or “forget” to swallow.**

What to do:

- Oral medications may need to be changed, discuss this with the nurse or doctor;
- give the patient only what they want and can handle. Do not force the patient to eat or drink, it could cause vomiting or choking;
- remind the patient to swallow.

**They may have irregular or shallow breathing.**

What to do:

- Do not be alarmed. It is quite common to have ten to 30 second periods when breathing may stop.

**They may have an irregular pulse or heartbeat.**

What to do:

- Do not be alarmed. Both of these are normal, and are signs of the “slowing down” process.

**They may develop “wet” sounding breathing.**

What to do:

- This is caused by saliva (spit) collecting at the back of the throat. Turn the patient on their side;
- raise the head of the bed or raise the upper body with pillows.

**They may be unresponsive to voices or touch, and may appear to be sleeping with their eyes open.**

What to do:

- Continue to speak in a calm, natural way. Everything you say may be heard.

## **They may lose control of bowels or bladder.**

What to do:

- Ask your home care nurse about protective padding. The nurse will tell you whether a catheter is necessary.

## **They may have cool legs and arms, and their skin might look blue or purple.**

What to do:

- The patient won't be feeling "cold", use the usual amount of bed coverings to keep the patient comfortable.

## **At the time of death**

- The patient will not respond.
- The patient will not breathe.
- The patient will not have a pulse.
- The patient's eyes may be open and staring, or closed.
- The patient may not have control of bladder or bowels.

## Before your loved one dies

When preparing for the death to occur at home, you can speak with the doctor and funeral home to talk about your plans. Take a few minutes to fill in the names and phone numbers on the next page to make things easier for you when the time comes.





## If you think death has occurred

This may be a confusing time for you.

- Call your family doctor, home care nurse or other health professional to tell them.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

- Call the funeral home to make arrangements for the attendants to come. Give yourself as much time with your loved one as you wish.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

- Call family members, friends, clergy or your spiritual advisor – anyone that you would like to have with you at this time. Don't be afraid to ask others to help you with the things that need to be done.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

## After the funeral home has been called

- Before the funeral home attendants arrive, you may wish to wash or dress the body.
- When the funeral home attendants arrive, discuss what they are going to do.
- You may want to help transfer the body to the stretcher.
- Take time to say your goodbyes before the stretcher is taken from your home.
- Funeral plans can be made the next day.



# Home Care and Support Regional Offices

## To access Palliative Care call:

West Prince . . . . . 859 8730

East Prince . . . . . 888 8440

Queens . . . . . 368 4790

### Kings

Montague . . . . . 838 0786

Souris . . . . . 687 7096

Based on information from the  
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1900 Fort St., Victoria, BC  
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"So long as we live,  
they too shall live and  
love for they are part of  
us as we remember them."

Gates of Prayer

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