

# What to Expect When Death is Near

As an illness advances, there is no way to predict exactly what will happen or the order of signs that can indicate a person is nearing death. However, health professionals who provide end of life care know what symptoms are often signs of a person's body shutting down. Understanding what to expect when someone approaches death can help the people caring for them know how to give support. It can also make some of the things that happen at this time seem less frightening.

Not everyone experiences all signs, or in a particular order, but most people will pass through a combination of these as death approaches.

## Energy loss and drowsiness

Deterioration in physical condition is usually the first sign that someone is near the end of life. The deterioration may be gradual or quick, and is reflected in the person's level of energy and range of activity. A person may pass through different stages as death approaches.

Stage 1: Performs regular activities

Stage 2: Tires quickly with exertion

Stage 3: Spends most of the time sitting or in bed

Stage 4: Doesn't get out of bed at all

## Eating and drinking less

As people get nearer to the end of their life they often don't want to eat or drink very much. This is normal. As they become weaker, the effort of eating and drinking may be too much and they may need help. If they feel sick or find it difficult to swallow, it is important they tell their nurse or doctor as this may stop them wanting to take medication.



## Breathing changes

When a person is very close to death (within minutes or hours), breathing may become shallow and irregular. Some people develop long pauses between breaths, which is called apnea. If a person is unconscious, and unable to cough, there may be a pooling of mucus at the back of their throat that can make a noise or rattling sound when the person breathes. This is not painful or distressing to the person.

## Changes in mental condition

Many people become confused, agitated or restless when they are closer to death.

Most people become quiet near the end of life. It may be that because they have less energy and are too tired to participate in conversations. Eventually they may become unconscious or unresponsive to things around them.

The final hours of life may bring signs of delirium, a sign of changing brain function, that makes people confused and restless or lethargic and withdrawn.

## How do you know how much time is left?

One approach to estimating how long someone has to live is referred to as the “momentum of change”. If someone’s condition is changing significantly from week to week, it’s a good indication that there are only weeks of life left. If the changes are from one day to the next, it may mean that there are just days of life left. This is only a general guideline. Each person is an individual, and there is no timetable.

It is important for patients and families to be aware that sometimes a person will decline faster than is expected, due to complications or a health crisis. To prepare for this possibility, consider addressing goals or wishes the person would like to accomplish while they are still able to do so. Encourage family and friends to spend time with the person and say their goodbyes.