

# When death is close at hand

The following information is to help you recognise and respond to the signs that may indicate when death is near. Not everyone will display all of these signs but this is often how the body prepares for the final stages of life.

| SIGN  | ADVICE  |
|---|---|
| Sleeps more and difficult to wake at times.   | Plan conversation times for when the person seems more alert.   |
| Loses appetite and may “forget” to swallow.   | Offer small servings of favourite foods or drink without forcing. At this time the body has minimal needs.  |
| Becomes confused about time or may not recognise familiar faces.  | Speak calmly. Remind the person of the day, time and who is in the room.  |
| Becomes restless, pulls at bedclothes, has visions of people or things that aren’t really there. They may develop a fixed stare.  | Leave a soft light on in the room. Provide reassurance and avoid physical restrictions where possible. Even if the person cannot respond, don’t assume they can’t hear you - hearing is the last sense to be lost.  |
| Loses control of bowels or bladder.   | This does not usually occur until death is close. The amount of urine will decrease or stop as death nears. The district nurse can advise on how this can be managed.   |
| Secretions collect at the back of the throat and sound like a rattle.   | This is because the person cannot swallow saliva but does not mean they are uncomfortable.<br><br>Turn the person on their side or raise the head of the bed. Sometimes medication can be given to help – ask the district nurse or your community nurse. |
| Arms and legs cool as the circulation slows down. Sometimes one side of the body will be warm and the other cold. Face becomes pale and feet and legs adopt a purple-blue appearance. | Use just enough coverings to keep the person comfortable.   |
| Breathing becomes irregular and even stops for short periods. The pulse becomes fast and irregular.   | There is no need to become alarmed about this. It causes no distress to the patient.  |

## When death occurs

- Breathing stops
- Heartbeat and pulse stop
- Eyes may be open or closed
- A 'last sigh' or gurgling sound may be heard
- There is no sign of life

### What to do if you think death has occurred:

Try not to call 999 for an ambulance. You should call your GP's surgery and a doctor will come to certify the death and support you. They will also remove any medical equipment from the patient. (If the patient has not seen a doctor in the 2 weeks prior to death, the police may also come.)

If you are uncertain what to do, call your District Nurse or North London Hospice.

Contact people you might like to have around you. These may include family members, friends and spiritual advisors.

When you are ready, contact a funeral director of your choice. There is no rush to do this if you wish to spend some time with the person who has died.

Funeral directors are listed in the telephone directory or on the internet. The National Association of Funeral Directors ([www.nafd.org.uk/](http://www.nafd.org.uk/) tel: 0845 230 1343) or The National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors ([www.saif.org.uk](http://www.saif.org.uk) tel: 01279 726777) can give you telephone numbers of those in your area.

You may want to inform the District Nurse, Care Agency and North London Hospice.

At this time you may be feeling very tired and emotional. You may feel unwell or have a headache. Try to take care of yourself as your wellbeing is important.

**Remember, you can call the District Nurse or North London Hospice if you have any other concerns or fears.**

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Serving the  
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