

Holy Redeemer Hospice

Knowing What to Expect at the Time of Death

Caring for a loved one who is dying is profoundly sad, and it is often difficult to be asked to consider what lies ahead. However, caregivers do worry about knowing what to do when the time comes. In addition to attending to physical comfort, your peace of mind is a primary concern of the Hospice team, who is here to help you feel confident about your loved ones care as death draws near.

Talking with the dying person is often a helpful means in planning a funeral service or memorial. Making choices and discussing arrangements in advance alleviates some of the burden at the time of death.

It may also be helpful to think about and discuss what you will do at the moment of death. It is suggested that you make a list of immediate family and friends that you want to be with you during the dying process or immediately after death.

Being present at the time of death...

You may want to be present during the final moments or you may choose not to be present. Staying close to someone who is dying is called “keeping a vigil”. It can be comforting to be there but do not feel that you must stay with the person all of the time.

Some people almost seem to prefer to die alone. It is not uncommon for the dying person to wait until loved ones leave the room before taking their last breaths. Sometimes if a person seems to be holding on, you may simply say, “I’m going to leave the room for awhile. I love you.”

In some cultures, specific prayers or rituals may ease the passage to death. This may be comforting to you and your loved one.

When death occurs...

The signs that death has occurred include no breathing (the chest stops moving and no air comes out of the nose) and there is no heartbeat or pulse. After death there are sometimes involuntary movements or jerking of the arms or legs. Sometimes there is an uncontrolled groan or cry because of muscle movement in the voice box or release of air from the chest. Sometimes there will be a release of urine or stool from the body. Eyes may be opened and glassy, the jaw will relax, and the mouth may be slightly opened.

What to do at the time of death...

The death of your loved one is not an emergency and nothing must be done immediately. Take the time you need for yourself and your grief. Some people want to stay with the body, sit quietly, or share memories with other family; other people want to go to another room. Some people call community clergy to come. If you have a list of people to notify, this is the time to call those that might want to come and see the body before it is moved.

At the time of death, call your Hospice team. The police or 9-1-1 do not need to be called. A hospice nurse will come as soon as possible to assist you. The hospice nurse will confirm the death, complete the necessary forms certifying the time of death, and dispose of any medications. The nurse will remove any tubes that are present and will notify the physician.

You and your family are welcome to be present and to pray, touch, and participate in this time. If you want to assist in bathing or dressing the body, that may be done. The body does not have to be moved until you are ready. You, or the hospice nurse, can call the funeral home whenever you are ready. When the funeral home arrives, you can decide whether or not you want to be present when they remove the body, or if you prefer to go into another room.

You will meet with the funeral home at a later time to discuss arrangements for services. The hospice nurse will complete a death certificate that will be provided to the funeral home. The funeral director will in turn ensure that official copies are promptly prepared for you. Faxed copies are not acceptable for the financial and insurance companies that will require death certificates, so you are urged to request ten to fifteen official death certificates.

Funeral Home Name: _____

Phone Number: _____