

# Last Days of Life - understanding what is happening

## A guide for family, whānau and carers of patients who are dying at home

The dying process is a normal part of life and unique to each person. Death usually comes gradually and peacefully, and there are common changes to signal that life is coming to an end. Knowing what to expect can help to make this time less worrying.

### Not eating or drinking

It is common to have little interest in eating or drinking and the body adapts to the reduced intake of fluids. Offering sips of water or, ice chips to suck, while person can still swallow provides comfort.

### Change in awareness

As weakness increases, the person may become sleepier and then gradually lapse into unconsciousness.

### Breathing

Breathing patterns may change, with maybe small or long pauses between breaths. Occasionally, there can be a noisy gurgle sound. This is normal and not distressing for the person. Changing their position may help.

### Incontinence

A loss of control of the bowel and bladder can be managed by using pads; sometimes an indwelling urinary catheter can be helpful.

### Increased confusion and restlessness

Increased restlessness may occur or, the person may have muddled thinking and conversations. Reassure them by talking calmly and holding their hand. Medication may be helpful if the person becomes distressed.

### Changing colour/temperature

You may notice that their arms and legs feel cool and clammy, look patchy and dark in colour. This may not mean they are feeling cold. Changes in temperature (hot / cold) are normal.

### How will you know your loved one has died?

- Breathing ceases.
- There is no heartbeat or pulse.
- There is no response to touch or talking loudly.
- The person's eyes are fixed on a certain spot, pupils dilated (large) and the eyelids may be open.
- The jaw is relaxed, and the mouth stays open.

### What do you do when your loved one has died?

- There is no rush to do anything immediately. You may wish to just sit and spend time with the person.
- It is helpful to note the time of death.
- You may want to reposition the person onto their back with a flat pillow under their head.
- Contact your nurse. If death occurs during the night, it is okay to wait until morning.
- Contact the person's GP who will visit to confirm the death, and write a death certificate.

### There may be many people to notify so consider asking family/whānau or friends to help with this task.

Make contact with a funeral director – for information on Funeral Directors go to: [www.fdanz.co.nz/fdanz-funeral-directors](http://www.fdanz.co.nz/fdanz-funeral-directors) or to the Department of Internal Affairs website: [www.endoflife.services.govt.nz](http://www.endoflife.services.govt.nz) for other helpful information.