

Respiratory tract secretions in the last days of life

Symptom assessment and management fact sheet

The inability to cough effectively or to swallow and clear secretions (saliva and mucous) from the upper airway in the last days of life can result in repetitive, noisy, rattly breathing. This is a normal part of the dying process and is unlikely to be painful or distressing for the unconscious person but can be distressing for families and carers. It is important to explain the cause of the noisy rattly breathing to families and carers to reduce their distress and reassure them it is normal.

Anticholinergic medication regimes

- Although there is limited evidence to support the use of medications for respiratory tract secretions, they are commonly prescribed in anticipation in the last days of life because audible secretions are more common.
- There are some conditions where audible secretions are more common for example lung disease, cardiac failure and MND.
- If an anticholinergic medication is used, it should be given prior or as soon as the noise begins and administered regularly such as in a continuous subcutaneous infusion.
- There is no evidence to support the use of one anticholinergic over another. However, glycopyrronium or hyoscine butylbromide are preferred because these medications are unlikely to cause or exacerbate delirium as they do not readily cross the blood-brain barrier.

How to help

- Repositioning the person on their side may help shift pooled secretions, reduce noise, and encourage postural drainage. Try different positions to find which works best.

- A towel may be placed under the person's head to absorb saliva that may drain from the mouth and prevent pillows and sheets becoming wet.
- Raising the head of the bed may help to clear the airway.
- If pooled secretions are visible in the mouth, consider gently removing them with a swab or sponge.
- Suction may be considered, however do not use suction near the hard or soft palate because this can cause tissue injury.
- Do not suction beyond the oral cavity because this is likely to stimulate the gag reflex, cause distress and may increase secretions.

Key message

For persons who do not respond to treatment, contact the treating medical team and consider specialist palliative care advice from your local service or PallConsult **1300 PALLDR (1300 725 537)**.

The palliMEDs app is available to support prescribers to provide optimal symptom management.

References

Therapeutic Guidelines. (2024). *Palliative care: Care in the last days of life*. https://app.tg.org.au/guidelines/Palliative_Care/Care_in_the_last_days_of_life

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