

Skin and hygiene care in the last days of life

Comfort assessment and management fact sheet

Good skincare is essential to maintain skin condition and manage potential skin breakdown, particularly from developing itch, pressure injury and sweating in the last days of life. Regular skincare will maintain and enhance the individuals comfort and dignity. Tailor the skin regimen to the individual person, balancing the frequency of hygiene care against the burden and benefits for the person. The frequency of repositioning should be determined by skin inspection and assessment of their individual needs. To minimise distress, consider reducing the frequency of wound dressing changes and care of pressure areas. Many people in the last days of life develop fragile, thin skin, therefore it is essential to take special care when providing skin and hygiene care.

How to help

- Keeping the person's skin as clean and dry as possible, managing incontinence and using barrier creams, foams, as necessary.
- The use of a pressure relieving mattress or overlay to prevent discomfort and promote skin integrity, whilst minimising the need to reposition the person.
- Use of hospital style bed with mechanical features to support manual handling and use of slide sheets when repositioning.
- Assessment of need for PRN breakthrough analgesia prior to hygiene and repositioning.
- Providing a sponge in bed, wash in warm (not hot) water or use warmed bed bath wipes and pat skin dry gently, ensure a clean shave is given if appropriate and clean bed sheets.
- Use a soap substitute such as an aqueous cream, soap-free bars or wash or use dispersible oils if the skin is very dry, added to the water, consider sensitivities.
- Apply a generous amount of emollient such as an aqueous cream, glycerine 10% in sorbolene cream or their favourite moisturiser at least twice a day, particularly after bathing.

- Consider eye care to enhance comfort including regular cleansing with normal saline, applying 'artificial tears' to relieve dry eyes, and soft lighting in the room.
- Consider keeping a cool environment and use skin cooling measures such as regular sponging with cool water if required due to skin sweating.
- Encourage light and loose-fitting cotton nightwear of the persons and/or family's choice.
- Keep fingernails and toenails clean, consider applying their favourite nail polish.
- Ensure hair is clean, consider hair washing, or use of a dry shampoo and comb hair neatly.
- Nursing staff should use their clinical judgement to determine when the person requires skin and hygiene care, routine cares may not be appropriate as the person deteriorates.
- Consider referral to Allied Health, Physiotherapy or Occupational therapy for additional support where appropriate.

References

[How to wash a person | caring@home](#)

Therapeutic Guidelines. (2024). *Palliative care: Care in the last days of life*. Retrieved January 7, 2026, from https://app.tg.org.au/guidelines/Palliative_Care/Care_in_the_last_days_of_life