

Care plan for the dying person

Agitation and restlessness in the last days of life

Symptom assessment and management fact sheet

Agitation and restlessness are common symptoms in the last days and hours of life. The dying person may be unable to find a comfortable position, may try to get out of bed, pluck at the sheets or air, groan and be incoherent. Potentially reversible causes should be identified and managed where possible to optimise the person's comfort. Sometimes the symptoms are due to the dying person's primary diagnosis and cannot be reversed.

Possible causes of agitation and restlessness:

- physical discomfort and poorly controlled pain
- medication toxicity, for example opioids
- delirium
- urinary retention, faecal loading or incontinence
- infection and fever
- metabolic changes for example hypercalcaemia
- withdrawal from medications, alcohol, nicotine or illicit substance
- emotional or existential distress.

How to help

- Use soft lighting, minimise loud noise and play soft, relaxing favourite music.
- Encourage the presence of people well known to the dying person, ask if they have unique knowledge of strategies that may assist to settle and calm them.
- Check bladder scan and contact treating team for consideration of a urinary catheter if urinary retention is diagnosed.
- Consider using nicotine patches to manage nicotine withdrawal.
- Encouraging family/carer(s) to provide gentle massage, scents and touch.
- Check if the person is too hot or cold and adjusting the room temperature and apply blankets as needed.

- Antipsychotic medication for example haloperidol, or benzodiazepines such as midazolam, are commonly prescribed in anticipation in the last days of life.

Key message

These symptoms require prompt management to improve the dying person's comfort. If concerns, contact 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

CareSearch. (2025). Care of the dying person. <https://www.caresearch.com.au/Evidence/Clinical-Evidence-Summaries/Care-of-the-Dying-Person>

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