

Breathlessness in the last days of life

Symptom assessment and management fact sheet

It is normal for the dying person to have changes in their breathing pattern during the last days and hours of life and does not necessarily mean the person is feeling breathless. It is important to explain altered breathing patterns to the person's family and carers to reduce their distress and reassure them it is a normal part of the dying process.

Altered breathing patterns in the last days or hours of life may include:

- slow or irregular breathing
- periods of rapid, shallow breathing (like panting)
- episodes of apnoea with periods of deep, rapid breathing in between (Cheyne–Stokes respiration)
- excessive but ineffective efforts to breathe deeply, known as agonal breaths
- noisy 'rattly' breathing associated with pooling of respiratory secretions
- sounds such as gasping, grunting, moaning or groaning.

How to help

- Adjust the person's position to optimise comfort and ease of breathing.
- Maintain a calm, relaxed environment.
- Increase cool air movement around the patient by opening doors and windows or using a fan as close to their face as tolerated.
- Oxygen therapy should not routinely be used, the mask and tubing can cause distress, increase agitation and cause mucosal dryness, without symptomatic benefit.
- Consider using a prescribed opioid medication for example subcutaneous morphine.
- Consider using a prescribed benzodiazepine for example subcutaneous midazolam.

Key message

Breathlessness requires prompt management to improve the person's comfort and reduce distress. 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

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

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

palliAGED. (2025). *Dyspnoea*. <https://www.palliaged.com.au/Improving-Care/Care-Needs/Symptom-Management/Dyspnoea>

palliMEDS app: <https://www.caringathomeproject.com.au/for-health-professionals/mobile-apps>