

Bladder care in the last days of life

Comfort assessment and management fact sheet

Urinary retention

Urinary retention is the inability to empty the bladder completely and can be a common symptom for a dying person. Reasons for the accumulation of urine that causes bladder distension, which can be painful and distressing, include:

- decreased mobility
- anticholinergic effects of medications (including opioids) causing decreased contraction of the bladder muscles – review these medications as appropriate
- severe constipation causing compression of the bladder – manage with laxatives and suppositories as appropriate
- spinal cord compression of the nerves to the bladder – this is particularly important in a patient with cancer if they are known to have spinal bone metastases.
- Haematuria and clot retention.

How to help

- Gently palpate the person's bladder to assess whether it is distended and if gentle pressure causes any distress.
- A bladder scan may also be used to diagnose retention in a safe and non-invasive manner.
- If the volume of urine in the bladder > 500mls, consider insertion of an indwelling catheter (in/out catheter or permanent) following discussion with a medical officer/nurse practitioner.

Urinary incontinence

Urinary incontinence is common in the last days of life and can be due to:

- loss of control due as a normal part of the dying process
- reduced bladder muscle function
- urinary tract infection
- bladder outflow obstruction
- reduced bladder capacity and/or local irritation.

How to help

- Protect skin from maceration by using skin care products and adhesive barriers
- Use stoma appliances for fistulas
- Use absorbent incontinence pads or a uridome, maintaining clean, dry skin
- Consider insertion of indwelling catheter

Key message

An indwelling urinary catheter can reduce the need for movement to void for a dying person. This is an invasive procedure with associated risks. Carefully consider the patient's and family's preferences.

References

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

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