

Bowel care in the last days of life

Comfort assessment and management fact sheet

In the last days of life bowel problems can include constipation, faecal incontinence and diarrhoea, these should be proactively managed to optimise the persons comfort, self-esteem and dignity.

Constipation is very common in the last days of life due to reduced peristalsis. It is distressing and can cause considerable suffering. The consequences of unmanaged constipation include abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, overflow incontinence, faecal impaction, urinary retention, and occasionally bowel obstruction and colonic perforation. Medications such as opioids and anticholinergics may slow gut transit time contributing to the increased risk of faecal impaction and subsequent faecal incontinence.

Constipation can also contribute to problems such as delirium, agitated behaviour, depression and anxiety.

How to help

- Monitor and record bowel movements and consider constipation if the person is agitated or appears to be in pain, and there are no other obvious causes for their discomfort.
- Examine the person for abdominal distension, tenderness and presence of bowel signs.
- Continue oral laxatives such as Picosulfate (Dulcolax) drops only if tolerated and contributing to comfort.
- Rectal interventions (e.g. suppositories) may be considered for symptomatic relief, but should be used cautiously and avoided if burdensome or unlikely to be effective.
- Enemas can be ineffective because they may not be retained in the rectum for long enough to have an effect.
- Provide meticulous skin and hygiene care to prevent skin breakdown, keeping the skin as clean and dry as possible.
- Manage faecal incontinence with use of continence pads and use barrier creams.

Key message

Constipation in patients with palliative care needs is usually multifactorial. When administering an opioid, always consider nonpharmacological measures to prevent constipation and consider the need for regular laxatives to prevent opioid induced constipation.

References

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

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