



***Module 6:  
Physical Issues***

# What are the Physical Needs of People who are Dying?

## *Physical Issues*

- It depends on the illness with which the patient is dealing:
  - Cancer
  - Progressive neurological conditions
  - HIV/AIDS
  - End stage organ failure
  - Lou Gehrig's
  - Diabetes
  - Alzheimer's
- Remain nonjudgmental
- Help the person to live as fully as possible
- Be alert to the person's changing needs
- Ask questions if unaware of symptoms and issues related to disease



# Symptoms at End of Life

- Although each illness will have some unique symptoms, almost all will involve the following:
  - Pain
  - Loss of appetite
  - Nausea and vomiting
  - Fatigue
  - Breathlessness
  - Constipation



# Managing Pain

- 98% of pain can be relieved:
  - Drugs (acetaminophen, codeine, morphine and other narcotics)
  - Nerve blockers
  - Chemotherapy, radiation therapy and surgery
- Various factors affect the success of pain management techniques:
  - Knowledge
  - Attitudes
  - Access to services
  - Culture
  - Self-image
  - Personality of patient
- Your role:
  - Observe and provide comfort, but never administer medications
  - Use knowledge gained in your role as confidant to report patient's pain to health care professional
  - Help patient identify and express how he/she is feeling

# Managing Other Symptoms

- Breathing problems
- Vomiting
- Fever or chills
- Diarrhea
- Constipation
- Headaches
- Problems with sleep
- Skin and mouth care
- Fatigue



# Managing Other Symptoms

- Comfort measures

1. Keep the room warm, free from drafts but ventilated.
2. Turn out lights that are not necessary. Keep room fairly well lit during the day. See that lights are not glaring and shining in the person's eyes.
3. Avoid excessive noise. Radio or television should be audible, but not too loud.
4. Reduce odours. Never smoke or wear scented products.
5. Offer cool drinks at least every 2 hours.
6. Brush the person's teeth after each meal. Use a soft brush only. Commercial mouth washes should not be used as they contain alcohol.
7. Give backrubs with a lotion. Massage the person's heels and elbows with lotion as they can become very dry.
8. Help the person turn from side to side every 2 hours – if allowed by your organization. (NOTE: volunteers need special training to assist with turning and positioning.) Place 1 or 2 pillows under the head, 1 behind back and 1 between legs. Bend the legs.
9. Keep under sheets free from wrinkles. Make sure the top bedding isn't too tight over the feet.

# Managing Other Symptoms

- Comfort measures (cont'd)

10. Brush the person's hair several times during the day, especially if the person enjoys it.
11. Wash the person's face and hands as necessary. Put a cool cloth over the forehead, especially if the person's temperature is high. This is cooling and refreshing.
12. Cut, file and clean fingernails. Use a lotion to keep hands soft.
13. Soak the person's feet in a basin of warm water for 10 to 20 minutes. Dry well, especially between toes.
14. If possible, encourage the person to dress in his or her regular clothes and sit in a chair. If not, help the person put on a housecoat and slippers. Cover the knees with a blanket. Keep the person warm.
15. Assist the person with short walks if he or she is able to walk.

# Signs that Someone is Nearing Death

- The body begins its final shutting down, but the spirit also begins the process of release
- Your role is to provide comfort and support for both aspects:
  - Physical: extra blankets, moist cloths for dry lips, etc.
  - Spiritual: reassurance, love, and permission to say good-bye
- Do not speculate on “how much longer” a patient has
- Specific signs of death being near:
  - Failing senses. Eyesight is usually the first to go, but hearing usually continues
  - Loss of appetite
  - Dreaming and hallucinating
  - Labored breathing
  - The “death rattle”
- When death arrives ...
  - No response to any stimulation
  - No breathing
  - No heartbeat or pulse



# Infection Control

- To protect yourself, as well as the person who is dying:
  - Make sure your immunizations are up-to-date
  - Wash your hands
  - Wear latex gloves:
    - if you have any open sores, cuts or cracks on hands
    - if you handle anything damp, or if you must clean up any fluids or excretions
  - Make sure your immunizations are up-to-date
  - Stay home if you have a cold or flu
  - Wear a mask if the person is coughing excessively
  - Never handle needles
- In case of accidental exposure:
  - Wash the affected area
  - Contact your supervisor
  - Contact your family doctor



# Next Steps?

- Click on the link below to take you to the Module 6: Physical issues quiz section
  - [Module 6 Quiz](#)

