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Active dying process: What to expect

Have you ever experienced a loved one dying, and felt unsure what to look out for or felt lost of what you should do? Learning about the dying process may help you. In this video, we share with you on some of the signs of active dying, although remember, not everyone follows a predictable sequence of stages.

Dying is a natural part of life and the process of dying is unique to each individual. Active dying refers to the last phase of the dying process, which average about 3 days. Let us journey with John, his family and the healthcare team as John approaches the active dying phase of life.

Towards the last phase of John's life, he has minimal appetite for food and drinks. He is likely to require only sips of liquid. He is bedbound and will need help for all his care needs. Whenever he wishes to eat or drink, the family and team will feed him small amounts carefully. The team also provides regular oral care and eye care to keep him clean and comfortable.

Hypotension sets in and John's blood pressure starts to drop and his pulses feel weak. His skin and limbs feel cold to touch, and may also start to mottle due to reduced blood circulation.

Johns starts to show changes in his breathing patterns. His breaths may become shallower. He may experience Cheyne-Stokes breathing where there are long pauses in between breaths. Towards the last few hours of life, he may take in long deep breaths with an open mouth, commonly known as gasping. These breathing patterns are often not uncomfortable to patients.

When John is no longer able to swallow his secretions, it may accumulate in his throat causing a rattling sound, known as the death rattle. The team and family can reposition him or use medications to reduce sounds from his throat secretions.

Sometimes, John may show signs of restlessness or even confusion. He may not recognise familiar faces and may start to hallucinate. As time goes by, John begins to drift in and out of consciousness. As hearing is widely thought to be the last sense to go, his family continues to speak to him and comfort him.

John also shows other signs of active dying. He has little urine output and he may not be able to control his bladder causing urinary incontinence.

Eventually, John dies when his breathing ceases and his heart stops. His family and healthcare team have walked with him through his journey, knowing that he was comfortable and surrounded by his loved ones.

The common signs of the active dying phase include having minimal oral intake, hypotension with cold peripheries, abnormal breathing patterns, reduced consciousness level and having poor urine output. Recognizing this combination of signs allows families and healthcare teams to better prepare and care for patients in the last hours of their lives.



References

1. Ellershaw J, Ward C. Care of the dying patient: the last hours or days of life. *BMJ* 2003; 326:30.
2. Stephanie M Harma, F Amos Bailey, Anne M Walling (2020). Palliative care: The last hours and days of life. UpToDate. Retrieved November 3, 2020, from, <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/palliative-care-the-last-hours-and-days-of-life>