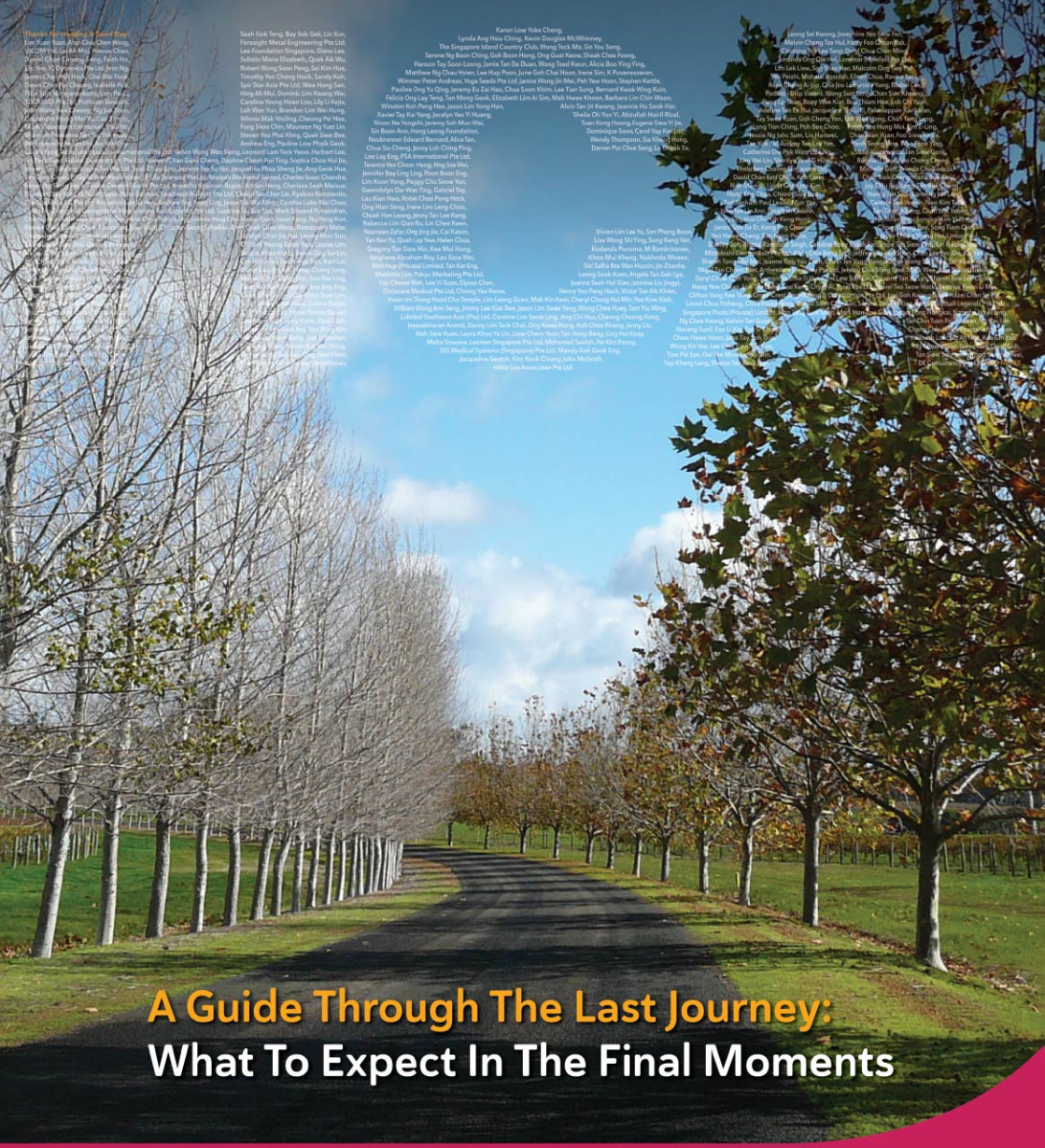


A Guide Through The Last Journey:
What To Expect In The Final Moments

HCA hospice

Creating Good Days

INTRODUCTION

Journeying The Final Chapter With Understanding And Care

Each of us will pass on from this world in our own way and time. You may feel sad and anxious when a loved one is dying. The fear of what is beyond and unknown is often part of this anxiety.

This guide aims to help you understand what to expect at the end of life, and to offer suggestions on how you can support your loved one and yourself. While every individual is different and may not experience all the symptoms described, we hope that understanding what you may see in these final moments can help you feel more at ease.

HCA Hospice is here to support you through this journey. Please feel free to share your concerns, fears and expectations with us.



1 LETTING GO AND WINDING DOWN

In the final days of life, there is a **gradual shutting down of bodily functions**. Your loved ones will slowly withdraw from their world, **decreasing their food intake and activities**. They will be more **fatigued, drowsy or even unresponsive**.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Your presence, gentle touch, and expression of love and concern will be consoling to your loved ones.

2 CIRCULATION AND THE SKIN

At first, your loved one may feel hot, but as circulation naturally decreases, the **skin becomes cool and clammy** – most noticeably in the hands and feet. **His/her face may become pale**. You are advised to discontinue blood pressure and oxygen level monitoring.

There may be a **blue tinge to nail beds, lips or limbs**. The heart rate may increase at first, but as the heart weakens, it will gradually slow down and **blood pressure will fall**. **Swelling may occur and skin may become very fragile**.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Use a fan if he/she is hot, or more blankets if he/she is cold. Gently massage the hands or feet and hold his/her hands.

3 BREATHING

Breathing patterns may change due to the disease, or a number of other reasons. Your loved one's **breathing may become fast, slow or irregular**, especially in the last hour of life. The breathing may sound noisy, congested, laboured and rattling. He/she may even snore loudly.

As the body weakens, your loved one can no longer clear his/her throat. **A thin film of fluid may collect at the back of the throat and create a rattling noise**. This does not cause your loved one any discomfort, but it can be upsetting to those who hear it.

Our Home Care Team can **provide treatment in the form of medications and sometimes oxygen to improve breathing**. When breathing finally stops, what seems to be the last breath may be followed moments later by one or two releasing breaths.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Re-position your loved one to lessen the rattling noise. To improve ventilation, open windows or use a fan (if he/she prefers this) and be a calming presence. Talk quietly in a comforting tone and manner.

4 COMFORT

You may be worried that your loved one will be suffering and be in pain. When he/she is no longer able to speak, we can carefully look for physical signs of pain, which include:

- **Grimacing**
- **Moaning**
- **Restlessness**
- **Clenched Fists**
- **Tense/Rigid Body**

We can relieve pain in many ways, including **medications such as injections, oral medicines, rectal suppositories or patches**. Other measures for comfort include **massage, change of body positions, music and prayer**.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Gently massage your loved one's hand with moisturising lotion, and moisten the lips with lip balm or an oral wet sponge. Play his/her favourite music or read a favourite book, keep noise to a minimum and avoid having too many people in the room at one time.

5 NUTRITION

Even before these last days, you may observe that your loved one gradually **loses his/her appetite even with his/her favourite foods**. In the final stages of any illness, the body loses its ability to digest. When a loved one is very close to his/her last hours, he/she would not feel hungry or thirsty. In fact, nature is helping your loved one to pass on in a comfortable way.

With a decrease in digestive functions of food and fluids, **artificial nutrition or intravenous fluids may worsen symptoms of breathlessness, swelling, congestion and skin breakdown**. The intravenous lines or tubes used may also cause discomfort.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Gentle touching, massaging and keeping the skin and lips moisturised are ways to show that you care. Reminding yourself that your loved one is not hungry or thirsty will help you to feel less worried.

6 RESTLESSNESS AND CONFUSION

As the brain begins to weaken, your loved one may become **confused, restless, delirious or incoherent**. There may be twitching in the limbs. As the body weakens, there will usually be **a loss of bowel and/or bladder control**. The amount of urine produced lessens and becomes darker.

As vision fails, the **eyes may be open or semi-open but not seeing**. They may become dry, sunken or glazed over. You can use a warm, damp cloth and eye drops to remove secretions. **Hearing is the last sense to be lost at the end of life**, so even when people can no longer respond, they may be able to hear you. They can **understand and be soothed by your comforting words**.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Speak softly to your loved one, avoid overcrowding the room or holding difficult discussions. Use aromatherapy oils to enhance the wellness of your loved one. Discuss with your Home Care Team; they can help to reduce your loved one's confusion and agitation with medications.

7 TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

When a loved one is very ill, caregivers often become exhausted, hungry and overwhelmed by emotions, leaving them with little energy to care for their loved one. You can recharge by doing the following:

- Take short breaks, step out for some fresh air or walk to the kitchen for a drink.
- Eat as regularly as you can and take short naps throughout the day.
- Talk to family/friends who can provide emotional and tangible support. Let them help you by staying with your loved one while you take a break (it will also allow them to feel useful).

Towards the end of your loved one's life, you will feel emotionally torn. On one hand, you do not want them to leave. Yet, you do not want to prolong their suffering.

It is a normal feeling and it means you want them to have peace and comfort.

Take care of yourself and let others care for you too. Counsellors are available should you need someone to speak with. Discuss with us on your needs and we will do our best to support you.

8 AFTER YOUR LOVED ONE PASSES ON

The death of a loved one will be painful even if you are prepared for it. Do spend as much time as you need with them. You may also ask your religious leader, minister or priest to visit for a prayer if you wish. Here's what to do after death:

- Look out for the signs of death: **no breathing**; **no pulse**; **no response**. Wait and observe for 10 minutes.
- Obtain a Certificate of Cause of Death (CCOD):
  - > Call a family physician to visit and certify the deceased person's cause of death
  - > Alternatively, funeral companies can arrange for a doctor as part of their services
- The doctor will guide you to log into: mylegacy.life.gov.sg > When Death Happens > Download Digital Death Certication
- The documents/information needed are NRIC, FIN or passport number, and death document number (provided by the doctor who certified the death). Download the death certification.
- Finally, you can print a hardcopy or provide a softcopy of it to the funeral director.

If you have issues with obtaining the CCOD, you may refer to the service providers listed in the Patient File or call the HCA nurse in charge during office hours. After office hours, call the HCA helpline at **(65) 8123 7700** for assistance.

You matter because you are you,
and you matter to the end of your life.
We will do all we can
not only to help you die peacefully,
but also to live until you die.

~ Dame Cicely Saunders
Founder of the global hospice movement