

# Palliative Sedation



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Patient and Family Information • Palliative Care

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When a person nears the end of their life, sometimes they suffer from severe symptoms that are hard to manage with medical treatments. Some of these symptoms may include: pain, shortness of breath, and delirium (sudden confusion).

Often these symptoms are due to the illness affecting the person's body. People may also experience unbearable fear, anxiety or emotional distress over what is happening to them. It is difficult to see someone you love suffering, or to suffer yourself.

In cases like this, after all other options have been tried without success or ruled out as not appropriate; the person/family may be asked if they would like to consider palliative sedation.

## What is palliative sedation?

Palliative sedation is the use of medication to make a person comfortable and not suffer. The goal is to use the least amount of medication necessary to keep the person sleepy and less able to waken.

## When would palliative sedation be offered?

Palliative sedation is offered when everything else has been tried to help the person dying of their illness be comfortable and all other options:

- Cannot help with the symptom.
- Have unacceptable side effects.
- Would take too long to work.
- Do not fit with what you and your loved one want.
- Cannot be given in the location where you want to be cared for.

## How is the decision made to start palliative sedation?

The decision-making process includes the person and/or family, doctor and other health care team members meeting and making the palliative sedation decisions together. Palliative sedation will only be offered if:

- The illness is serious and death from that illness is likely soon.
- Suffering is unbearable and unmanageable.
- It fits with the person and family goals of care and for the remainder of life.
- The person and/or their substitute decision maker understand the risks and benefits and gives informed verbal consent.

## What can I expect if palliative sedation is started?

- If palliative sedation is started, a goal will be made with the person, family and health care team about the level of sedation, and only enough medication to reach that goal will be given.
- The health care team will work together to find the right dose to reach that goal.
- Nurses will regularly monitor the person to make sure they are comfortable.
- You will be supported emotionally by the health care team members through the whole decision-making and palliative sedation process.
- You will see more sleepiness and weakness, changes in breathing, skin color and temperature, and no longer eating and drinking.
- The person will die more comfortably.

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## Palliative Sedation (*continued*)

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### **How can I support my loved one during palliative sedation?**

Depending on the level of sedation the person will be very sleepy and less able to waken. They may move a little and/or open their eyes to voice, but there may not be any eye contact.

Being present is often more important than what is done or said.

Even if the person is not conscious they may hear you, so family and friends are encouraged to speak to the person. This can be very meaningful, regardless of whether the person is able to respond.

Providing comfort care such as; holding a hand, moistening a dry mouth, playing music or gentle massage may support the person who is sedated.

### **How will you know that the pain has subsided?**

The purpose of palliative sedation is to make a person comfortable and not suffer from severe symptoms when all other medical treatments have not worked.

During palliative sedation, the health care team will use a tool to assess and record the person's level of pain on a regular basis. This tool is planned and proven to assess pain levels when a person is not able to communicate easily.

### **Will the person be hungry and thirsty?**

No, the person does not experience suffering from hunger or thirst at the end of life. This is a normal part of the dying process.

At end of life a person tends to refuse food and fluids on their own. Experience has shown that food and fluids at end of life can cause more discomfort such as: swelling, pain, more mucous, nausea and vomiting.

### **Is palliative sedation common?**

No, palliative sedation is used as a last resort to make a person comfortable if their suffering is unbearable. It is used rarely as most people have relief without sedation.

### **How is palliative sedation different from medical assistance in dying (MAiD)?**

Palliative sedation is only offered when a person is expected to die soon and they are not able to be comfortable with other medical care.

A person must be alert and capable to consent for themselves for MAiD, whereas a substitute decision maker can consent for palliative sedation on the person's behalf.

If a person is sedated with palliative sedation, they die from their illness. When a person is given MAiD, they die from the medication.

The exact timing of death within days and hours is not known with palliative sedation, but is more predictable with MAiD.