

This leaflet describes some of the physical and emotional changes that happen when someone is in their expected last days and hours of life.

It anticipates some of the questions you may want to ask about what is happening and why. It also encourages you to ask for further help or information if there is anything at all that is worrying you.

## Coping with dying

The dying process is unique to each individual. Yet in most cases there are common characteristics or changes that help us to know that the person is dying.

These fall into four main categories:

- Reduced need for food and drink.
- Withdrawing from the world.
- Changes in breathing.
- Changes which occur before death.

### 1. Reduced need for food and drink

When someone is in their expected last days and hours of life, their body no longer has the same need for food and drink as before. The body's metabolism slows down and the body can't digest the food so well or take up the goodness from it. People stop drinking, and although their mouth may look dry, it's not a sign that they are dehydrated. Moistening the mouth and applying a gel will give comfort.

It can be hard to accept these changes, even when you know the person is dying, as it's a physical sign that they are not going to get better. Even so, you can still show that you care about your loved one by spending time with them and giving comfort through your presence.

### 2. Withdrawing from the world

For most, the process of 'withdrawal from the world' is a gradual one. People spend more and more time asleep. When they are awake they are often drowsy, and show less interest in what is going on around them. Feelings of calmness and tranquillity can accompany this natural process.

### 3. Changes in breathing

Towards the end of life, as the body becomes less active, the demand for oxygen is much less. People who suffer from shortness of breath are often concerned that they may die fighting for breath. In fact breathing eases as they start to die.

Feelings of anxiety can make breathing problems worse. The knowledge that someone is close at hand is not only reassuring; it can be a real help in preventing shortness of breath caused by anxiety. So just sitting quietly and holding your loved one's hand can make a real difference.

Occasionally in the last hours of life there can be a noisy rattle to the breathing. This is due to a build up of mucus in the chest, which the person is no longer able to cough up. Medication may reduce it, and changes of position can also help. The noisy breathing can be upsetting to carers but it doesn't appear to distress the dying person.

## 4. Changes which occur before death

When death is close (within minutes or hours) the breathing pattern may change again. Sometimes there are long pauses between breaths, or the abdominal muscles (tummy) will take over the work. As a result the abdomen rises and falls instead of the chest.

If breathing appears laboured, remember that this is more distressing to you than it is to the person dying.

Some people may become more agitated as death approaches. If this is the case, the health care professionals will talk to you about it. Having ensured that pain and other symptoms are controlled with medication, they will give some sedation.

The skin can become pale and moist and slightly cool before death.

Most people do not rouse from sleep, but die peacefully, comfortably and quietly.

*Adapted and reproduced with kind permission from St Christopher's Hospice, London, 2010*

[www.stchristophers.org.uk](http://www.stchristophers.org.uk)

## 5. How we can help

This is likely to be a difficult and painful time for you, as you lose someone you love or have cared for. It can be hard to know what to say, how to help or what to do.

Nurses, doctors and other staff are there to help you work through your worries and concerns and to offer you care and support.

We hope that you will come and talk to us if there is anything on your mind. We will write a care plan with you, based on your loved one's individual needs.

### Useful Contacts

#### Jersey Hospice Care

##### Specialist Palliative Care Team

Tel: 01534 876555 (24 hours a day)

or via **Jersey General Hospital**

Tel: 01534 442722 (Mon-Thurs 08.30-16.30  
Fri 08.30-15.30)

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#### Family Nursing & Home Care

Tel: 01534 443600 (Mon-Fri 08.30-16.30)

Tel: 01534 442000 (JGH switchboard)  
16.30-23.00 and weekends

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Or please contact your own **General Practitioner**



**Jersey Hospice Care**  
*your care, your choice, your time*

States of Jersey  
of Jersey  
The States of Jersey Department for  
**Health & Social Services**

# Coping with dying (last days of life)

## INFORMATION LEAFLET

  
**Family Nursing  
& Home Care**

 **PRIMARY  
CARE  
BODY**