



End of Life Management When a Loved One Has Cancer

Understanding Cancer

- Cancer is a disease in which some of the body's cells grow uncontrollably and spread to other parts of the body. Cancer can start almost anywhere in the human body, which is made up of trillions of cells. Normally, human cells grow and multiply (through a process called cell division) to form new cells as the body needs them. When cells grow old or become damaged, they die, and new cells take their place. Sometimes this orderly process breaks down, and abnormal or damaged cells grow and multiply when they shouldn't. These cells may form tumors, which are lumps of tissue. Cancerous tumors spread into, or invade, nearby tissues and can travel to distant places in the body to form new tumors (a process called metastasis). Cancerous tumors may also be called malignant tumors. Many cancers form solid tumors, but cancers of the blood, such as leukemias, generally do not.

Some expected symptoms

- Pain, nausea, constipation or diarrhea, anxiety, confusion, restlessness, and depression.

Cancer specific final stages

- *Digestive System*—food or waste may be blocked causing bloating, nausea, constipation, or vomiting. The patient may also not be able to absorb nutrients leading to malnourishment.
- *Lungs*—if too little healthy tissue is left or parts of the lungs are blocked, the person may feel short of breath.
- *Bones*—too much calcium may go into the bloodstream leading to unconsciousness. Bones are prone to fracture and not heal.



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- *Liver*—the liver removes toxins from blood, digests foods, and converts food into usable substances. If the liver is unhealthy, the body’s chemical balance may be disrupted. This can lead to a change in mentation, even coma.
- *Bone Marrow*—the body may not be able to make enough healthy blood cells which leads to anemia. This may cause a decrease in oxygen in the blood. Disruption to white blood cell production make it difficult to fight infection. Blood clots or excessive bleeding may occur.
- *Brain* —may lead to memory problems, balance issues, bleeding to brain, or loss of body’s function.

Sleep changes

- May have drowsiness with increased sleep, confusion when they first wake up, or continual fatigue.
- Worries or concerns may keep person up at night.
- Continue to talk openly about loved one while they sleep.
- Trazadone or melatonin may be suggested by your hospice nurse.

Pain control

- Provide pain medication regularly. Seek advice from hospice nurse.
- Offer other methods for pain relief, such as massage and relaxation.
- Pain medication regimen may need to be adjusted frequently.
- Look for signs of pain like grimace to face, rigid body posture, moaning, restlessness, etc.
- There are many options of narcotic and non-narcotic medications to try. The nurse may also suggest introducing small doses of morphine.

Appetite changes

- As the body naturally shuts down, the need or want for food often decreases. This may be caused by the body’s need to conserve energy and decreased ability to digest.
- Let your loved one choose if, when, and what they would like to eat or drink.
- Because chewing may become difficult, soft or blended foods may be appetizing.
- If ability to swallow is compromised, offer moisture for lips and mouth.

Emotional Support – “How can I best support my loved one?”

- Keep your loved one company—talk, watch movies, read, or JUST BE WITH them.
- Allow the person to express their fears and concerns—dying, leaving family, etc.
- Reminisce about life.
- Avoid being secretive—talk openly about disease and symptoms with loved one.
- Include person in decision making.
- Reassure your loved one that the advanced directives will be honored and clarify any concerns.
- Respect person’s privacy and/or silence.

Self-care

- It is important to take care of yourself.
- Get out, walk, breathe fresh air, cry, eat, and try to relax.
- Consult often with your hospice nurse.
- Explore options for respite, in-home care, home health aides, etc.
- You, or the patient, have selected Stillwater Hospice to support you during this journey with the aim of providing comfort and dignity to your loved one as they experience the end-of-life process. The treatment will generally focus on managing pain, education on nutrition, safety and fall prevention, skin health, and medication intervention for emotional components such as anxiety, agitation, sleep, or mood health. The Stillwater team of nursing, aides, social worker, and chaplain will work with the patient and family to help develop a plan of care and provide support so the “journey” will not be traveled alone. It is recommended that family also reach out to the American Cancer Society for any other information that may be helpful to you.

