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Tips to Help Keep the Patient Comfortable

Use an eggshell mattress and foam cushions.

Many people with a terminal illness lose weight; therefore, they may be less comfortable lying on their former mattress or sitting in chairs that used to suit them. Eggshell mattresses are made of foam and are softer than conventional types. Some people also cut up foam rubber to put on chairs or couches. The foam softens the seat and makes it more comfortable. Eggshell cushions and mattresses can be bought at large department stores or medical supply stores. Sometimes, visiting nurses will order a special mattress to prevent bedsores.

Use lip balm or salve to prevent chapped lips.

Dry lips and mouth can be a serious problem when a person is not drinking much. Some of this discomfort can be prevented by using lip balms. Avoid using Vaseline if the person is on oxygen, however, as it can clog the line.

Use the end of a straw to give small sips of liquids.

Some people have trouble drinking from a glass because of weakness. If so, give fluids by dipping the straw into the glass and then holding your finger over the end of the straw. This holds liquid in the straw. Drip the liquid into the person's mouth by loosening the finger for short periods of time.

Use a special spoon to give liquid medicine.

Pharmacies carry special spoons that help to avoid spilling liquid medicine. The spoon handle is enclosed and looks like a tube. You can pour the medicine into the scoop part, and it will flow down into the tube and into the person's mouth. It is much easier to take medicine such as Maalox with this type of spoon, but you also can use a syringe. Have the nurse show you how to use it. If the person is having trouble swallowing, a few drops under the tongue will still be absorbed.

Easing discomfort caused by fever.

Sometimes, fevers develop because not enough liquid is taken. If so, encourage the person you are caring for to drink more. Cool cloths applied to the brow can help as well, but do not give icy or cold baths. In some cases, the doctor may order antibiotics to fight the infection if, for example, the infection is causing pain or discomfort.

Manage and prevent problems with bleeding.

Minor skin bleeding sometimes occurs because of bumping the arms or wrists on furniture. This is because the skin is not as tough as it once was. Medicines also can cause changes in the skin so that it is easily scraped open. Small gauze pads can be placed over any open spots and wrapped with 1- or 2-inch gauze to stay in place. Avoid using tape, however, as it might tear open the skin when removed.

If a nosebleed occurs, tilt the head back, but do not have the person lie flat. This could make the person choke on blood dripping from the nose into the throat. Put ice wrapped in a washcloth on the nose for short periods, such as 2 minutes.

Pressure on the skin and nose stops most bleeding. Bleeding inside the body or in the urine and stool, however, cannot be stopped in this way, because you cannot put pressure on these areas. If bleeding from the nose or other places continues, call the visiting nurse. The physician might order medication to slow down the bleeding as well.

Consider using an electric hospital bed.

Electric beds are easy to operate. The person with cancer can control the positions, and so can you. Hospital beds also can be non-electric, using a crank at the bottom to raise it up or bring it down and to elevate the head or feet. Cranking takes more work and bending, however. Many families set the bed in a living room or den on the first floor so that they will be near and visitors will have more room to visit.

Let the patient plan the day.

Letting the patient plan the day will show respect and support his or her dignity. Let the person plan what to do, what to eat or drink, when to sleep, and when to visit with others. Some people find watching television helpful.

Touch, and talk.

Even if the person is sleeping much of the time or slips into a coma, touching and talking remain important. Touch can include back rubs or holdings hands. Visitors can read scriptures or stories or review old times. Some people read poems, and background music can help. All of these decrease a person's sense of being alone and can be very comforting.

Invite ministers and church members to visit.

Prayers and conversations with ministers and fellow church members can be very comforting for some people. Priests or deacons may want to bring sacraments, such as last rites or communion. Many home health agencies and hospice groups have a chaplain on staff who can visit as well. These visits should not be forced, however. It is up to the person with cancer to decide who would be comforting.

Understand that what you do is NOT wrong.

Some caregivers worry they are not doing enough to keep the person comfortable or are not doing the right things. A few may even feel responsible for bringing on an early death. Nothing you can do (or not do) will change what is happening or lead to an early death. There really are no "mistakes" made at the end of life. The important point to remember now is that the goal is comfort. Source: American College of Physicians

Source: American Cancer Society

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