

A Guide to Comfort Care for Residents and Families

What is comfort care?

Comfort care is an active approach to care that emphasizes quality of life through symptom management rather than curing the underlying disease. The goal of comfort care is to prevent or manage uncomfortable symptoms and experiences such as pain, nausea, loneliness and anxiety.

How do we know the resident is comfortable?

The best way to find out is to ask your loved one regularly. Ask about a variety of physical discomforts such as pain, soreness, weakness, nausea, excessive sleepiness or itching. Also ask about psychological discomforts, such as sadness or grief. Many residents receiving comfort care are unable to report their physical and psychosocial problems. For these residents, we need to observe carefully for signs of discomfort or distress. For example, physical pain may be expressed through facial grimacing or frowning, increased agitation or restlessness, or change in usual behavior. Be aware that distress can be caused by physical symptoms, emotional discomfort or spiritual suffering.

Comfort care is a team effort

The comfort care team consists of staff, family members and the resident. This collaborative approach is key to ensuring that you or your loved one is comfortable. Healthcare providers should ask you or your loved one about comfort or observe signs of discomfort. Family members can also observe comfort levels and report any concerns to health care practitioners, even though healthcare providers are doing the same. Each team member plays a unique role, but ensuring the overall comfort level requires everyone to help. Below are some specific roles for healthcare providers.

What can physicians, nurse practitioners and other care providers do to promote comfort?

- Review and stop medications that are no longer useful and may be causing uncomfortable side effects
- Limit vital signs to respirations (breathing) and temperature (this practice may vary)
- Limit uncomfortable tests and procedures
- Try to avoid unnecessary hospitalizations and ER visits unless the resident prefers to go to the hospital or it is necessary for their comfort
- Talk with families and residents about alternatives to emergency room visits and hospitalizations to treat health problems such as infections
- Loosen dietary restrictions and focus on having the resident eat for pleasure and taste

What can nurses do to promote comfort?

- Assess pain and other symptoms
- Prevent or manage pain and other symptoms
- Use artificial tears or eye lubricant to avoid dryness and itching
- Keep the family informed about any changes in the resident's condition
- Communicate with primary care providers about the resident's condition and symptoms
- Teach families about what to expect. For example, decreased appetite and intake is normal in advanced illness. So is decreased activity and movement and social interaction
- Help residents and family members manage stress and address concerns
- Talk with residents and family members about spiritual matters or pray together if desired
- Explore with residents about what gives life meaning
- Empower the family to provide care. Reassure family caregivers they have much of the capacity needed. Give information and skills

What can nursing assistants do to promote comfort?

Nursing assistants play a critical role in promoting comfort. They use their skills and knowledge of the resident to:

- Move and position the resident to minimize pain
- Observe carefully for pain and other symptoms and promptly report any indication of discomfort
- Observe for side effects of medicine that are used to keep the person comfortable. For example, some pain medicines cause constipation which itself causes discomfort
- Keep the person's skin clean and hydrated
- Role model for family how to interact with the resident. Touch and position the resident gently. Speak softly to the resident even if they cannot respond
- Moisten the person's mouth and apply lip balm as needed
- Offer as quiet and private an environment as possible for residents and families
- Residents and families experience loss and grief throughout the illness as well as the end of life. Recognize that everyone experiences grief in their own unique way. Support families in their own expressions of grief



What can family members do to promote comfort?

- Make sure the team knows your loved one's preferences, such as their favorite foods, music and activities
- Engage in activities that the person enjoys. Examples include listening to favorite music, reading from favorite books
- Offer food and fluids that your loved one enjoys and is able to take
- Talk with healthcare team members about spiritual needs and cultural practices that can comfort your loved one
- Be sure to give your loved one important messages such as, "I love you," "I will miss you," and "good-bye." Always talk with your loved one as if they can hear, even if they don't respond to you

With comfort care, there is never "nothing more we can do." We can always promote comfort and quality of life for residents and their families.

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