

“What actually happens when we die?”

Around 70% of deaths in Australia each year are what we call ‘expected’ or predictable. The other 30% are due to accidents or are sudden deaths. This is not to suggest that an expected death is any easier or less sad, just to illustrate that despite what we see on TV, the majority of deaths in our country are foreseeable, even if we don’t know exactly when they will happen.

So although it can be very tough for most of us to talk about it – if we gently faced the reality that someone has a life-limiting incurable condition we would be able to talk about it more and help prepare and support the person and their family for what is coming.

There are many illnesses, each with their own symptoms, treatments and associated side effects. However, for non-accidental or ‘expected’ deaths some signs are commonly seen in the last hours or days. This is also known as the ‘terminal phase’.

The terminal phase or dying usually includes the following signs

- Sleeping longer
- Physically weaker and requiring more help with all tasks
- Eating and drinking less
- Trouble swallowing or poorly coordination to swallowing
- More confusion or restlessness
- Irregular, shallow or “wet” sounding breathing
- Delays between breaths can be more than 30 seconds
- Reduced reaction to voice or touch
- Eyes remain open during sleep
- Loss of control of bladder and bowels
- Retreating (physically or emotionally less ‘present’ in the room)
- Cooler arms and legs
- Vocalisations (‘calling out’)
- Irregular heartbeat
- Unarousable (‘Coma’)

The moment of death can be gradual as the body naturally slows or ‘winds down’. Or it can come suddenly and catch you unaware. Frequently it happens when everyone has left the room, even for a moment after a long vigil. In an ‘expected’ death there might be signs that death is happening soon (breathing and colour changes to the body) or there might be none. Each death is different in that way.

When death has occurred

- There is no breathing
- No rise and fall of the chest (2 minutes)
- No pulse at the wrist or at the side of the neck (carotid pulse)
- The person’s eyes and mouth might be slightly open
- There may be a change in appearance with softening of muscles
- With muscle relaxation there can be loss of urine or faeces, sounds like another breath as air escapes or muscle twitches or “jumping”.

This might be challenging for some people to read. If that is the case for you, please talk to someone about it and remember to talk with your GP or health care provider if you need information that is specific for you or your loved one

