

Emergencies in Palliative Care

Fact sheet

An emergency in palliative care is a sudden event which could severely impact on quality of life and must be dealt with urgently.

There are only a few true emergencies in the palliative care setting, and the likelihood of experiencing one is small.

Generally such situations are known, but rare, complications of your disease. They can sometimes be anticipated and planned for, and occasionally prevented.

The emergencies in palliative care that have the potential to cause most distress are:

- Severe pressure on the nerves in the spine (Spinal Cord Compression) which could lead to paraplegia;
- Severe bleeding (Haemorrhage);
- Compression of the blood vessels in the upper chest (Superior Vena Cava Obstruction) leading to swelling of the head and neck; and
- Sudden elevation of Calcium in the blood (Hypercalcaemia) which causes marked confusion.

Other situations which may arise and require planning for are:

- Sudden or severe pain;
- Severe breathlessness;
- Choking;
- Sudden loss of consciousness;

- Fitting (seizures);
- Blocked urinary catheter;
- Profuse or persistent vomiting; or
- Falls and fractures.

Management plans for coping with all these situations can be developed with your doctor and health care team.

Making plans

It is reassuring to have a plan in place, and the strategy you and your doctor decide upon depends on how you are and where you are, as well as the underlying illness.

Things to consider when making a plan are:

- What type of emergency might occur;
- Whether or not it is reversible;
- The stage of your underlying illness and your energy levels as active treatment may not maintain or improve your quality of life;
- Your comfort because treatment may cause unnecessary discomfort or distress;
- Your wishes;
- Your carer's wishes; and
- The support you have available.

Keep the finished plan in an obvious place and make sure that everyone who might need it knows where it is.

Check that you have all phone numbers of the people you need to call in a very visible place e.g. next to the phone, or on the fridge.

Ensure that you have all the medication and equipment that might be needed.

Palliative care nurses and doctors have expertise in writing plans for these situations.

Related Fact Sheets

Spinal Cord Compression

Haemorrhage

Superior Vena Cava Obstruction

Hypercalcaemia

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