

# Information for patients and carers about medications towards the end of life

This document has been written to help your understanding of how you may be cared for when dying. When someone is approaching the end of their life, the teams caring for them will aim to support them to live as well as they can until they die. Using medications to manage symptoms, such as pain, is one important aspect of good end of life care.

You may have concerns about the medications that may be needed towards the end of life, and how they are given. The following information has been written to help to answer some of the commonly asked questions.

## What is Palliative Care?

Palliative care is care for a person living with a life-shortening illness. The focus is on improving symptoms and supporting emotional well-being, social and spiritual needs in order to maintain quality of life.

## Why do we plan for end of life care?

When someone is dying it is important to tailor care to their individual needs and priorities and provide support to them and those caring for them. In the last few days of life, symptoms can change rapidly; by planning ahead, we can focus on what is most important to the person and more easily adapt to their changing circumstances to continue to support them.

## What happens if I can no longer take my tablets?

In the last days or weeks of life, it is very common for people to find it more difficult to swallow tablets.

Your doctor or nurse will check through your medications and may advise that you do not need some of them at this stage. It is possible to give some medications as an injection under the skin (subcutaneously). If you are taking a medication for pain or nausea, for example, and can no longer swallow it, it is important that it is continued to make sure your symptoms stay under control – this is when a syringe driver may be considered.

## What is a syringe driver?

A syringe driver is a small battery operated pump which delivers a medication or mix of medications to a patient under the skin (subcutaneously) over 24 hours. The use of a syringe driver may be considered if you are unable to take your medication by mouth, due to difficulty swallowing or because of sickness. The medications are renewed by a nurse every day, and the drugs and doses can be adjusted if needed.

## What are 'anticipatory medications'?

You may be prescribed 'anticipatory medications'. These medicines are usually given by injection under the skin (subcutaneously) and are kept in your home or nursing home 'just in case' you need them. They can be administered by a health professional if you need them at any time of day or night – hospices and hospitals have similar arrangements for their patients. There may be a dose range prescribed so that the health professional giving the medication can advise if the dose needs to be adjusted in response to changing symptoms.

## What medications will be used?

The health professional will check the prescription to ensure that what you are given, either 'just in case' or continuously via a syringe driver, is the right medication and the right dose for you.

### Medications used towards the end of life may include:

- **Pain relief**

Usually an opioid medication such as morphine or oxycodone – these can also be used to treat breathlessness. Opioids are of immense value in the management of pain. Their appropriate and expert use in palliative care can transform patients' comfort and well-being at the end of life.

- **Relaxants**

Midazolam is a drug used to treat seizures, or in patients who are very restless or agitated (sometimes referred to as 'terminal agitation'), and can cause drowsiness. It can also be used to treat breathlessness. Other drugs are sometimes used in addition to help in this situation.

- **Anti-sickness**

A variety of anti-sickness medications are available, and the choice will depend on the likely cause of the sickness.

- **Anti-secretory**

Sometimes the breathing can become noisy in the last days of life – these drugs dry the secretions causing this.

## How do we know the medications are safe?

Health professionals will only prescribe morphine or similar if you have pain or to help with breathlessness. The dose of medication is based on your individual needs and will aim to be enough to improve your symptom without causing side effects. The dose should start at the lowest appropriate for your situation (very low if you have never had morphine or similar before, higher if you have been used to taking it) and may be gradually increased if needed. Morphine and similar medicines are not used for sedation, and relaxants such as midazolam are not used for pain control – each symptom is assessed and treated separately.

There is no evidence that these drugs hasten the dying process when a person receives the right dose to control their symptoms.

All health professionals in this region are able to access prescribing guidance produced by local specialists in palliative and end of life care.

Please discuss any questions or concerns you have about any of medication with your health professional.

## Where can I get more information?

The information in this leaflet comes from a number of sources including those listed below:

NHS choices website for information on palliative care, controlling pain and other symptoms:

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/end-of-life-care](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/end-of-life-care)

Marie Curie website for information about syringe drivers:

[www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/terminal-illness/medication-pain-relief/syringe-drivers](http://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/terminal-illness/medication-pain-relief/syringe-drivers)

NICE guideline QS144 Care of dying adults in the last days of life:

[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/qs144](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/qs144)

The Palliative Care Handbook. A good practice guide. Wessex Palliative Physicians:

[www.hampshirehospitals.nhs.uk/application/files/2915/6898/0952/GB\\_9th\\_edition\\_\\_2019.pdf](http://www.hampshirehospitals.nhs.uk/application/files/2915/6898/0952/GB_9th_edition__2019.pdf)