

HOPE HEALTHCARE and HOSPICE

Caregiver tips for identifying

BREATHING CHANGES



A patient's breathing can change from a regular rate and rhythm to several rapid breaths followed by a period of not breathing when transitioning to the end of life. When patients are sleeping, their breathing patterns can vary; however, they may seem better when they are awake and alert. Patients may often accumulate the body's fluid in their throat, causing them to begin to cough and/or have noisy breathing. Oxygen is most commonly administered in the nose by tubes or a mask. When trouble breathing gets worse, administering a higher rate of oxygen may not be helpful as the patient's ability to move air diminishes. As their breathing pattern begins to change often, caregivers become alarmed. However, breathing changes does not mean the patient is suffering or in distress.

Signs of Breathing Patterns:

- Shallow or irregular breathing (fewer than 8 breaths per minute.)
- Apnea (periods of no breathing with 5 to 30 seconds or longer between breaths.)
- Panting type breaths (breathing rate above 25 breaths per minute.)

Non-Medical Interventions Can You do NOW:

- Elevate the head of the bed.
- Position the person on their side to help clear any secretions that are causing noisy breathing.
- Avoid suctioning. It may help reduce the distressing sound for a little while but does not relieve the cause of the symptom and can increase irritation that adds to congestion. The suctioning procedure itself may cause discomfort to the dying person.
- Use a dampened cloth or gauze to gently clean the inside and outside of the mouth of the sticky secretions that can accumulate. You can also use a moist sponge swab.
- Ask our hospice nurse for their suggestions. Medication may help dry up the moisture that causes noisy breathing but can leave other areas like the mouth, nose, and eyes dry.
- Play soft music.
- Gently touch the person and reassure them that you are close.
- Cool the patient's room and ensure they are wearing lightweight clothing.
- Open a window to provide a breeze and fresh air.
- The HOPE Healthcare and Hospice team is available to answer your questions, provide comforting care and support during this time.

Questions or concerns about Breathing Changes?

Call our hospice nurse at (337) 703-4674 or visit our website at www.hope-hospice.com.

