

If you would like to know more about the information in this leaflet, please ask a member of staff

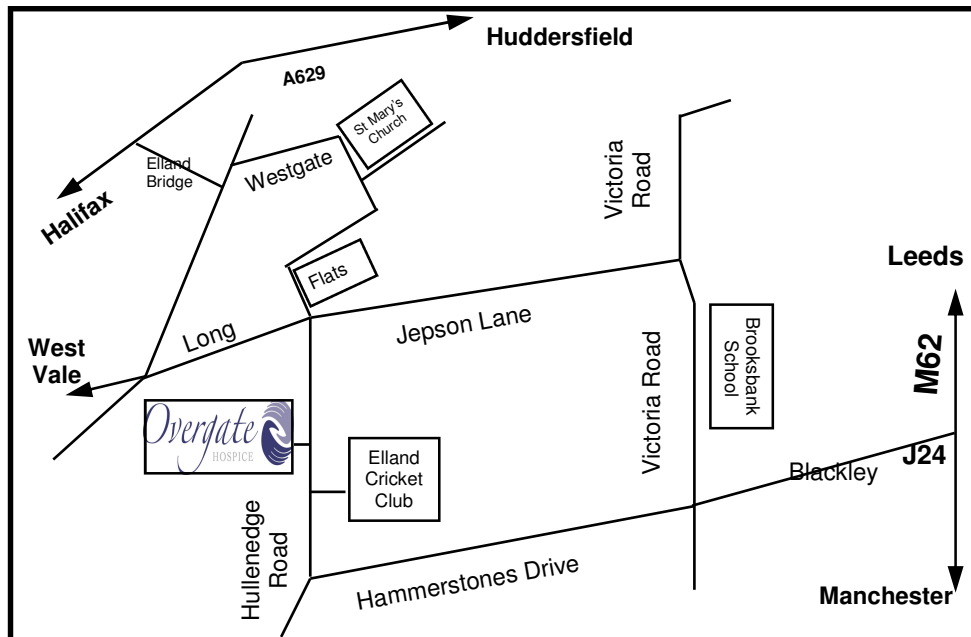
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# Coping with Dying

Information for patients and carers to help understand the changes which occur before death



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Overgate/publications/clinical/coping with dying

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There comes a point in everybody's life when we have to think about death and dying. Not all patients admitted to the hospice are dying but some are. When we start to think about dying most of us do not know what to expect. Not knowing what might happen makes us worried and anxious. It is often hard to know what to say or do. You might find it easier if you know what may happen as death approaches. The staff at Overgate are there to help and guide you, if you wish them to.

This leaflet describes some of the things that happen as a person dies. We hope you will find it helpful and that you will feel able to ask us more questions if you want to.

### **Will he/she die fighting for breath?**

People who have been short of breath as part of their illness are often frightened that they will die fighting for breath. People who have not had problems with their breathing often worry that they will have problems with breathing when they die. At the end of life, as the person becomes weaker, the need for oxygen is less and so breathing often becomes easier than it has been.

Being frightened or worried can make breathing difficulties worse. The knowledge that someone is close at hand can help to ease the fear and so help the breathing.

Sometimes, in the last hours of life, there can be a noisy rattle to the breathing. This is due to the build up of mucus, which the lungs make naturally, which a person is no longer able to cough up. Gently changing a person's position in bed may help reduce this. Sometimes it is possible to give medication to reduce the amount of mucus and therefore help the situation.

Occasionally the breathing remains noisy despite changing the person's position and medication. This is distressing for the carers but does not appear to distress the person who is dying.

At the end of life many people breathe through their mouth. This makes the lips and mouth dry. Moistening the mouth, gently with a sponge and using lip balm will give comfort.

### **Why does he/she not want to eat or drink very much?**

When someone we care about stops eating and drinking it is hard to accept, even when they are dying. We know that not eating and drinking is a sign that the person is not going to get better and that their body is weakening.

As a person grows weaker, the physical effort of eating and drinking may be too much.

There comes a point when food and drink are no longer needed or wanted. This stage can be hard to accept, but you can still care in other ways such as offering sips of water or moistening the mouth with a damp sponge. Spending time together, sharing memories or family news are also very important.

### **Why is he/she so sleepy?**

As a person gets weaker, as death approaches, they begin to withdraw from the world. The person will spend more time sleeping and will be sleepy even when awake.

The person's lack of interest in their surroundings is part of the natural process of dying. It is often accompanied by feelings of peace and tranquillity. It does not mean that the person no longer cares about those they love.

Eventually the person will lapse into unconsciousness and may remain like this for some time. This can carry on for a number of days, or it can be much shorter.

When death is very close (within minutes or hours) the person's breathing may change and there may be long gaps between breaths. The skin may become pale and slightly cool to touch. Most people do not wake from this state and die peacefully.