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Physical Signs of Death

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If you are like me, you worry about facing things that you have never faced before. I remember driving an hour just to see the place where I was going to take my medical boards – I wanted to experience how long it took to get there, how the parking was, and what the place looked like. While it probably ended up not being the best use of my time, it helped me to worry less.

As a hospice doctor, I know that almost all of my patients (and their families) wonder and worry about the changes that occur (or might occur) in the days and hours just before death. Just like me with the medical boards, they want to be prepared and they want to know what to expect.

When we think about the final stages of the dying process, we must understand that we experience two interrelated processes: physical decline and mental-emotional-spiritual release. The latter topic is covered in another article here. In this present article I want to share with you what we can expect **physically** during our final days and hours.

First of all, the good news is that, unlike death in the movies, most patients gradually slip into death in a manner comparable to facing sleep. It isn't like we are active one day and dead the next. Death from disease is usually a measured, deliberate, and orderly affair. Convulsions, a heart attack, or hemorrhage just before death can occur; but these are unusual and are certainly not the norm.

Secondly, just like taking a long car trip, there are some common physical mileposts that are often seen the last days and hours. These mileposts are signs that our journey is close to coming to an end. These changes do not require medications, they are not medical emergencies. They are simply evidence that our body has begun the process of shutting down and our time is short.

Now, unlike a trip down the interstate where every driver travels the same road, not all of these signs and symptoms will occur with every person, nor will they occur in the same sequence. Every person is unique – we are all one of a kind – and the dying process will often reflect that uniqueness.

The most important thing to recognize is that death typically occurs gradually, at a regular pace. Like snow disappearing in the spring sun, slowly – almost imperceptibly – our energy starts to melt away. We don't feel like walking around the house. We are

more content to simply sit in a comfortable chair. We start eating less and less, often preferring pureed foods. We become less interested in what is going on around us. While before we used to read the newspaper from front to back, now the newspaper no longer interests us. We just don't care about things as strongly as we did in the past. We start to drink less; hunger and thirst seem less urgent in their call to us. Despite not eating, we don't feel hungry; and despite not drinking, we only want small amounts.

There is a marked decrease in our movements as strength slowly leaves us. We begin sleeping more and spending more time in our bed. Our urine output decreases and it may become tea-colored as it becomes concentrated. Our skin becomes cool, especially in the arms and in the legs as our circulation decreases. Sometimes the skin may feel clammy, damp, or even bluish in color.

Awareness can be quite variable. Some of us slip into an unconscious state while others do not. Hallucinations can sometimes occur. Some of us become restless or anxious. This is usually caused by circulatory and metabolic changes. Our breathing will often become noisy due to mucus collecting in our throat. We usually become less alert and aware at this stage. Finally, the depth and frequency of our breathing becomes less and less until we stop entirely.

One time I was very sick for about three days. I wasn't aware of – so didn't remember – a whole lot about my sickness. When I was finally completely better, I listened with fascination as my wife told me how sick I had been and what I had gone through. Our bodies are such that we seem to *sleep* through our most difficult physical times. Soldiers in battle, people in car accidents, and cancer patients recovering from surgery all tell us this same story. Just like them, most of us will simply sleep through our dying.

We may experience some or all of the changes I described above. Most likely, we will be completely unconcerned about these changes, we probably won't feel them, and they won't seem very important. Sometimes this active dying phase will occur over a period of hours and sometimes over a period of days. Even when many of the above milestones are present, it can be very difficult to predict precisely the amount of time any particular person has left.

Especially if you have hospice care, members of your health care team members will check on you more often and offer special support during the dying process. There are many things that can be done to help you feel comfortable, supported, and loved during the last hours and days of your life.