

Suggestions for hospice care

Question: My friend's mother has been diagnosed with lung cancer. The doctor said her mother will probably only live for about six more months. He suggested they arrange hospice care. My friend and her family are distraught. What do you suggest?

Answer: The National Institute on Aging, part of the National Institutes of Health, has developed the publication "End of Life - Helping with Comfort and Care." This publication provides an overview of issues commonly facing people caring for someone nearing the end of life.

Hospice care is designed for a patient whose illness is not responding to medical attempts to cure it or slow the disease's progress. The hospice approach to end-of-life care provides comprehensive comfort care to the dying person as well as support to his or her family but, with hospice, attempts to cure a person's illness are stopped. The booklet describes ways to provide individualized care that can provide a dying person the best quality of life for his or her remaining time on earth.

There is a comprehensive section that explains how comfort care can relieve suffering as much as possible while respecting the dying person's wishes. People who are dying need care in four areas: physical comfort, mental and emotional needs, spiritual issues and practical tasks. Watching someone you love die is hard enough, but thinking that person is also in pain makes it worse. The publication emphasizes how successfully reducing pain and or concerns about breathing can provide needed comfort to someone who is close to dying. Medical teams develop ways to ease breathing problems and manage pain. Giving the dying person and his or her family the opportunity to meet with a counselor who is familiar with end-of-life issues can help them manage mental and emotional distress.

The booklet explains that when friends and families don't know how to help, they may stop visiting in order to avoid their dying loved one. This can add to the dying person's sense of isolation. The publication highlights the importance of discussing concerns with families, friends or doctors. The simple act of physical contact - holding hands, a touch or a gentle massage can make a dying person feel connected to those he or she loves. Music therapy might improve the person's mood by evoking

memories and helping them relax.

Some helpful sections include: finding care at the end of life; dementia at the end of life; understanding health care decisions; things to do after someone dies; getting help for your grief; and planning for end-of-life decisions. The publication also provides contact information for resource organizations individuals can turn to for more information.

Call Catholic Charities' Answers for the Aging at 410-646-0100 or toll free in Maryland at 1-888-502-7587 if you would like a free copy of this publication.