

## Symptom Management

### Shortness of Breath Management

For a patient who is ill, the process of breathing can become difficult at times. This is often referred to as “shortness of breath” or “air hunger.” Breathing difficulty can create a decrease in the oxygen level in the body.

#### Signs of Shortness of Breath may include:

- A restless or anxious feeling.
- A faster breathing rate.

#### Treatment for Shortness of Breath:

- Be calm and reassuring.
- Raise the head of the bed or place more pillows behind the back and head.
- Have the patient sit up and lean forward. This position will help the lungs fill more easily.

### Changes in Respirations

Respirations will change from a normal 12-20 times a minute. They may increase to 40 breaths or decrease to six breaths a minute. The breathing pattern often changes from shallow to panting-like. Periods of long pauses (10-30 seconds) between breathes may occur. This is called apnea. Another change in the breathing is called Cheyne-Stokes respiration. This refers to an abnormal pattern characterized by alternating periods of apnea and deep, rapid breathing.

This kind of breathing is not uncomfortable for the person, but it is a response to the body's weakening condition.

#### Comfort measures you can provide include:

- Elevating the head of the bed.
- Turning the person on their side.
- Having a fan on, gently moving air.
- Talking with nurse/doctor about using oxygen.
- Speaking gently offering reassurance.

## **Symptom Management**

### **Changes in Behavior**

#### **Confusion and Disorientation**

The person near end of life may seem confused about the time of day, place, and even the identity of people around them. The person may report seeing things or people that are not visible to you (a hallucination).

When these symptoms are present, you may wonder if the person is taking too much or not enough medication. Generally, these symptoms are part of dying as the body's metabolism slows down.

#### **Comfort measures you can provide include:**

- Report this change in condition to the nurse/doctor. They will assess the medications being used.
- Identify yourself by name before you speak to the person.
- Provide reassurance by remaining with the person.
- Limiting visitors may decrease the level of confusion.

#### **Restlessness and Agitation**

The person may become restless, such as pulling at bed linens or clothing, or engaging in other repetitive movements. This often happens due to the decrease in oxygen to the brain. Sometimes restlessness or agitation can be a symptom of physical discomfort or pain. Unresolved emotional or spiritual concerns can also be a contributing factor.

#### **Comfort measures you can provide include:**

- Report this to nurse/doctor, they will assess for underlying pain.
- The social worker and/or chaplain can provide assistance.
- Minimize distractions such as, loud noises, TV, and ringing phones.
- Use soft music and low lighting.
- Have someone sit with the person.
- Use a baby monitor while out of the room.