

Palliative care explained

Palliative care includes specialised medical care for people living with a serious life-threatening illness and their families. This type of care is focused on providing patients with relief from the symptoms, pain and stress of a serious illness – whatever the diagnosis.

The goal is to improve quality of life for both the person and their family. Palliative care is provided by a team of doctors, nurses, and other specialists who work with the person's other doctors to provide an extra layer of support. Palliative care is appropriate at any age and at any stage in a serious illness, and can be provided together with treatment.

Australia is culturally diverse. When someone is dealing with serious illness or dying, important cultural values and needs are highlighted. Palliative care takes a holistic, person-centred approach. It affirms life and regards dying as a normal process. It responds to the psychological, social, emotional, spiritual and cultural needs of the person and their family, helps them to make the most of each day, and provides support with loss, grief and bereavement.

How palliative care helps

Palliative care can be provided in the person's own home, in a residential aged care facility, at a specialist palliative care facility (referred to in the past as a hospice), or at another health facility, depending on where the person lives and where they wish to die. It complements the range of medical treatments and services already available and helps people remain functionally independent as an important component of quality of life.

Palliative care supports anyone caring for family or friends with a serious, life-threatening illness. Some carers provide emotional support – by being there to listen and comfort their relative or friend. Other carers provide help with meals, medications, bathing and transporting their relative or friend to medical appointments. You are not required to take on any of these roles unless you feel comfortable in doing so. Many carers talk about it turning out to be a special time, but caring can be a lot to manage along with the other parts of life.

Palliative care services have social workers and psychologists who help people with a life-threatening illness and their carers identify their social and personal needs and find the best way to address them. For instance, they can provide advice on how to respond to children who are dealing with the impact of a parent, sibling or grandparent's illness or death.

Palliative care services can link carers to respite services and service volunteers can support families with practical help and companionship.

Many people are concerned and can be involved when someone has a serious and life-threatening illness. Palliative care involves family and friends, who need to be prepared for the death of someone they love.

Palliative care workers are able to offer help and support at each step of the journey and during the grieving process.

Palliative care offers a range of services to the person and their family. This includes:

- Nursing
- Consultancy to the person's doctor
- Day care
- Diet advice
- Loan of equipment
- Physiotherapy
- Occupational therapy

- Respite
- Counselling
- Social worker services
- Spiritual support
- Pastoral care
- Bereavement support
- Support from trained volunteers.

Referrals to palliative care

You can be referred by anyone who is caring for you – including health professionals, your family and friends – or you can refer yourself.

Simply contact your local palliative care service or look on the Palliative Care Victoria website to find services in your area. You can phone Palliative Care Victoria on (03) 9662 9644 and ask for more information too.

Palliative care is for cancer and non-cancer illnesses

Palliative care is available for all people facing a serious life-threatening illness. Palliative care services are committed to caring for everyone, regardless of their race, culture, background, religion or belief system.

Pain can be managed

Many people living with a serious, life-threatening illness are afraid of pain because of the false belief that pain cannot be controlled without awful side effects.

Fear of pain adds to the total burden of pain, yet not all people living with terminal illness experience pain. Sometimes pain is made worse by anxiety. Sometimes people report less pain than they experience because we all interpret pain according to particular life experiences, values and beliefs.

It is important to speak up about your pain and your fears about pain so that you can be given accurate information. Good pain control requires good communication amongst patients, carers, medical and nursing staff, and can involve addressing what you think about your pain experience.

Pain is a symptom most feared by people living with serious, life-threatening illness. Modern palliative care pain management means that patients can expect to remain virtually pain free throughout their illness.

Cost

Palliative care is generally free. There may be charges for the hire of some specialised equipment, medications, dressings and treatments.

Questions about your illness

There are many questions you may like answered. For instance, some people want to know what will happen to them and their bodies as their illness progresses. Answers to these sorts of questions are very personal. The supportive staff of a palliative care service will help you with these or any other queries you may have.

Palliative Care Victoria brochures can answer some of your questions, covering topics such as the process of dying and about grief. They are available in languages other than English.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local palliative care service
- Palliative Care Victoria Tel. (03) 9662 9644

Things to remember

- Palliative care helps people with a life-threatening illness.
- Palliative care supports the person, their family and carers.
- Pain can be managed.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Palliative Care Victoria

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