DRAFT CONTENT : Palliative Sedation- Family Handout

When people are very close to the end of their lives, sometimes they develop severe symptoms that medical treatment cannot manage, or experience suffering that cannot be eased. Often these symptoms have to do with how the person’s disease is affecting their body. Pain, nausea, vomiting, hallucinations and severe shortness of breath are some examples of these symptoms. Other times people may have intolerable fear and anxiety about what is happening to them, or overwhelming emotional distress.

In cases like these, after all other treatment options have been considered, tried without success, or ruled out as not appropriate, the patient and/or family may be asked if they would like to consider the option of palliative sedation.

Palliative sedation is the use of medication to reduce a patient’s level of awareness so that the patient is no longer experiencing distressing symptoms or suffering that cannot be eased. The goal is to use the least amount of sedation necessary to allow a patient to be comfortable. In some cases that means a patient may be arousable for brief moments and then go back to sleep; or a patient may not be arousable at all.

People on palliative sedation are always given pain medications since they may not be able to express pain if they are experiencing it. For the same reason, nurses continue to monitor their bladder and bowels. In all cases the goal of palliative sedation is to allow a person to be comfortable at the end of their life.

Palliative sedation is absolutely not intended to “hasten death”. Hospices never use treatments that would intentionally shorten or end someone’s life. However, sometimes the amount of medication necessary for a person to be comfortable can have unintended side effects. If you are concerned about this, please let us know so we can talk with you and your family about this.

Questions and Answers

Add one about eating and drinking?

Palliative Sedation: Question and Answer
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Many patients facing serious illness suffer from extremely distressing symptoms. Sometimes the only way to provide relief is through sedation. Learn answers to some of the most basic and commonly asked questions.

Q: What is Palliative Sedation?
A: Palliative sedation is a way to minimize pain in seriously ill patients that cannot be relieved in any other way. An infusion of a sedating drug is provided to a point where the person appears to be comfortable and the distressing symptoms are relieved.

Q: Is palliative sedation common?
A: No. Palliative sedation is a treatment of last resort. It is used very rarely because the vast majority of patients can get acceptable relief without sedation.
Q: Does palliative sedation actually hasten death?
A: No. Studies clearly show that palliative sedation does not hasten death. It is the progression of the disease that causes the body to gradually shut down and eventually die. Research shows that patients at the very end of life who receive palliative sedation do not die more quickly than patients who are not sedated. This research has been published in such top tier peer reviewed professional journals as Annals of Oncology, Journal of Palliative Medicine, Journal of Pain and Symptom Management, Archives of Internal Medicine, and Palliative Medicine.

Q: Are there accepted guidelines for treating people in the last weeks of life?
A: Yes. Much has happened in the last six years. Protocols and guidelines for medical care during the last hours of life are on the websites of major health and palliative care organizations. Medical journals and textbooks have also published guidelines.

https://getpalliativecare.org/palliative-sedation-question-answer/