

Abridged Version

# The Prepared Patient®



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## Hospice Care: What Is It, Anyway?

It's often hard for patients and their loved ones to acknowledge that the time has come to consider hospice care.

Hospice can provide helpful and supportive physical and emotional care and comfort in the months, weeks and days before death. Hospice services typically involve care from a team that includes a physician, nurse, medical social worker, and nutritional, pastoral and other counselors. Through the ups and downs of emotions and changes in physical status, hospice team members are prepared to help patients and their families with sensitivity and flexibility.

And for caregivers and families, hospice services don't end with the patient's death: grief counseling is available in the aftermath.

### Hospice and Palliative Care Options

*Hospice care* generally refers to care received during the period of time when a patient has stopped seeking treatment for a life-threatening illness or when more treatment is extremely unlikely to prolong life.

*Palliative care* addresses breathing difficulties, severe nausea, fatigue and emotional symptoms such as depression and anxiety at any stage of a *life-threatening* disease or illness.

Generally, for insurance companies or Medicare to pay for hospice benefits, a person must have a predicted life expectancy of less than six months. But signing onto hospice is neither a permanent contract nor a death sentence; it doesn't mean you're going to die tomorrow. "It simply means you meet the criteria to receive this benefit" says Kathryn Gurland, a licensed clinical social worker and cancer navigation consultant with PEG'S Group in New York City. The average length of a hospice stay was 69 days in 2009, according to the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization.

### Locate a Hospice Agency

- U.S. Administration on Aging (<http://www.eldercare.gov/>)
- National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (<http://www.nhpco.org/>)
- Hospice Foundation of America (<http://www.hospicedirectory.org/>)
- National Association for Home Care and Hospice (<http://www.nahcagencylocator.com/>)
- Visiting Nurse Associations of America ([http://vnaa.org/vnaa/g/?H=HTML/Find\\_a\\_VNA.html](http://vnaa.org/vnaa/g/?H=HTML/Find_a_VNA.html))

In a hospital-based hospice program, a special unit is reserved for hospice patients and their caregivers and families, who have access to support services and social workers, chaplains and other professionals to help them deal with the emotions and stress of a terminal illness.

Nursing homes and long-term care facilities may also offer hospice services.

Stand-alone hospice centers are another option in some communities. Those facilities provide hospice care only for patients with life-threatening illnesses, in a home-like environment.

For some people, especially those in rural areas, options might be limited. Talk to your doctor or state health department about nearby hospice resources.

Making the decision to use hospice care typically occurs after a physician informs the patient that more aggressive treatments are unlikely to prolong life and may even make remaining days more difficult.

The first few days of hospice can be intense, with visits from new care team members such as admissions nurses, doctors, home health aides, medical supply deliveries, chaplains and even volunteers. But the sooner a patient signs up for hospice, the greater the improvement the hospice team can make in his or her quality of life, Gurland says.

Though patients enrolled in home hospice care receive weekly or more frequent visits from a nurse and other members of the hospice team, caregivers still provide most of the care.

If you and your family are considering hospice care, above all, remember that your choices, needs and wishes are paramount, experts say. "If families are not satisfied with their hospice team, they have the option to choose another hospice," Gurland says.

## Hospice and Palliative Care Info

- American Society of Clinical Oncology: Advanced Cancer Care Planning (<http://www.cancer.net>)
- Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association (<http://www.hpna.org/>)
- National Institute of Nursing Research: Palliative Care (<http://bit.ly/igYnjw>)
- Palliative Care Policy Center (<http://www.medicaring.org/>)
- Last Acts of Kindness (<http://www.lastactsofkindness.com/>)

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