

Secretions

Noisy Respirations, Wet Respirations, Terminal Secretions



At the end of life, there are certain symptoms that are commonly experienced no matter if the person is very young or very old. Though the symptoms may be similar, the management of care is individualized according to person's wishes and goals. It is important to recognize symptoms early and make thorough assessments and observations in order for the symptoms to be best managed.

Noisy respirations (wet respirations, terminal secretions) may occur at the end of life. This may be referred to as the "death rattle." It is a buildup of saliva and/or mucous in the back of the throat. A person very close to death may be too weak to clear the secretions by coughing or swallowing. As a result, a loud rattling, gurgling, or bubbling sound occurs when the person breathes in and out. Noisy or wet respirations are not dangerous and are not uncomfortable for the person but may be distressing for the family to hear.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Noisy or wet breathing
- Presence of secretions in the mouth or back of throat
- Drooling of secretions
- Rattling, bubbling, gurgling, or congested sound with breathing in and out

What to report to the hospice/palliative care team

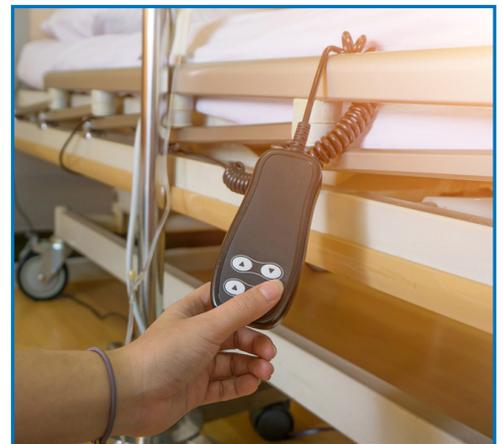
- Any change of breathing pattern
- Psychosocial and/or spiritual concerns
- Any change in the person's condition

What can be done?

Most terminal secretions do not respond to medications. Many drugs have been tried to decrease the secretions, but they only seem to cause side effects without any consistent benefit. Here are some things you can do instead that may help:

- Elevate the head of the bed
- Turn the person to side lying
- Decrease fluids if told to do so by your nurse

(continued)



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Conclusion

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Noisy respirations are not dangerous and are not uncomfortable for the person but may be distressing for the family to hear. It is important to report any changes in condition to the health care team.

References:

Ersek M. *Hospice and Palliative Nursing Assistant Core Curriculum*. Pittsburgh, PA: Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association;2009.

Coyne P, Chrastek J. "Symptom Management from Strollers to Walkers and Everything in Between." Presentation at the HPNA 5th Annual Clinical Practice Forum, Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association; Sep 16-17, 2011: Pittsburgh, PA.

Approved by the HPNA Education Committee July 2012

