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Frequently Asked Questions About Palliative Care

Planning for care during a serious illness can be challenging. Palliative care is an option that can help patients and their families. To learn more, explore answers to frequently asked questions about palliative care below.

What is Palliative Care?

Palliative care is focused on improving quality of life for people with serious illnesses and their care partners. It is available to people of any age who need it, not just older adults. The major elements of palliative care include managing a person's symptoms effectively and ensuring that their care is coordinated.

Palliative care is interdisciplinary, which means that it involves multiple types of doctors and other care providers. These providers work together with patients and their families and care partners to ensure that the treatment plan reflects the person's goals and values.

Palliative care can start as early as a person's diagnosis or not until later in their illness, and it can occur alongside other types of treatment for the disease. This form of care includes, but is not limited to, [advance care planning](#), [end-of-life care](#), hospice care, and [bereavement support](#).

Palliative care is a resource for anyone living with a serious illness. A serious illness may be defined as a disease or condition with a high risk of death or one that negatively affects a person's quality of life or ability to perform daily tasks. It may cause symptoms or have treatments that affect daily life and lead to caregiver stress. Examples of serious illnesses include [heart failure](#), [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease](#), [cancer](#), [dementia](#), [Parkinson's disease](#), and many others.

Palliative Care and Hospice Care: What is the difference?



Who Provides Palliative Care?

A palliative care team may include specialist nurses and doctors, social workers, religious or spiritual leaders, therapists, or nutritionists, among other professionals. Your team may vary depending on your needs and level of care.

How Does Palliative Care Differ from The Care I'm Getting Now?

Palliative care can be provided alongside your current treatment and care. Your palliative care team works with your current doctor and others to provide specific treatments and care plans. Palliative care is meant to enhance your current care by focusing on quality of life for you and your family.

How Do I Know If I Need Palliative Care?

People living with a serious illness such as cancer, heart disease, lung disease, or kidney failure, may experience emotional or physical pain related to their illness. If you're having trouble coping with this pain, palliative care may be right for you. You don't need to wait until your disease is in the advanced stages or you're in the final months of life to start palliative care. [Talk with your doctor](#) if you're considering starting palliative care. To begin the process, your health care provider can refer you to a palliative care specialist. If he or she doesn't suggest it, you can ask your health care provider for a referral.

Where Can I Find Palliative Care?

Palliative care can be provided in hospitals, nursing homes, outpatient palliative care clinics and certain other specialized clinics, or at home.

If you're looking for palliative care in your area, visit the [National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization](#) website.

Will My Insurance Cover Palliative Care?

Most private insurance plans at least partially cover palliative care services. [Medicare](#) and [Medicaid](#) also typically cover most of these services. Veterans may also be eligible for palliative care through the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#). If you have concerns about [paying for palliative care](#), a social worker, care manager, or financial advisor at your hospital or clinic may be able to help you.

Does Using Palliative Care Mean I'm Dying?

Not necessarily. Palliative care is meant to relieve symptoms such as pain, breathing difficulties, or nausea, among others, and relieve stress for patients and their families. Palliative care can be used at any time after diagnosis of a serious illness.

How Does Hospice Care Differ from Palliative Care?

[Hospice care](#) is a specialized form of palliative care that is delivered in the final months or weeks of life. Hospice care is used when patients and their families no longer wish to pursue treatments that are meant to slow or halt the progression of an illness, and instead focus only on [comfort care](#). Hospice care services are generally covered in full by Medicare and most other insurances.

Should I Include Palliative Care in My Advanced Care Planning?

[Advance care planning](#) involves making decisions ahead of time about the health care you would want to receive at the end of life or in a medical crisis. When a person is diagnosed with a serious illness, they should prioritize early advanced care planning conversations with their family and doctors. Studies have shown that patients who have participated in advanced care planning are more likely to be satisfied with their care and have care that is aligned with their wishes.

[PREPARE For Your Care](#), funded in part by the National Institute on Aging, is an interactive online program that helps you fill out an advance directive and express your wishes in writing. This tool is available in English and Spanish.

What Are the Benefits of Using Palliative Care?

Studies have shown that palliative care can have many benefits for both patients and their families. These studies show that those enrolled in palliative care have fewer symptoms, greater emotional support, and increased patient and family satisfaction.

You may also be interested in

- Exploring information on [advance care planning](#)
- Reading about [different care settings at the end of life](#)
- Learning about [providing care and comfort at the end of life](#)

This content is provided by the NIH National Institute on Aging (NIA). NIA scientists and other experts review this content to ensure it is accurate and up to date.

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