

Help with Hospice Care

Thinking about hospice care can be an emotional consideration, but offering the best care possible during difficult times can help bring comfort to both yourself and the person who needs it.

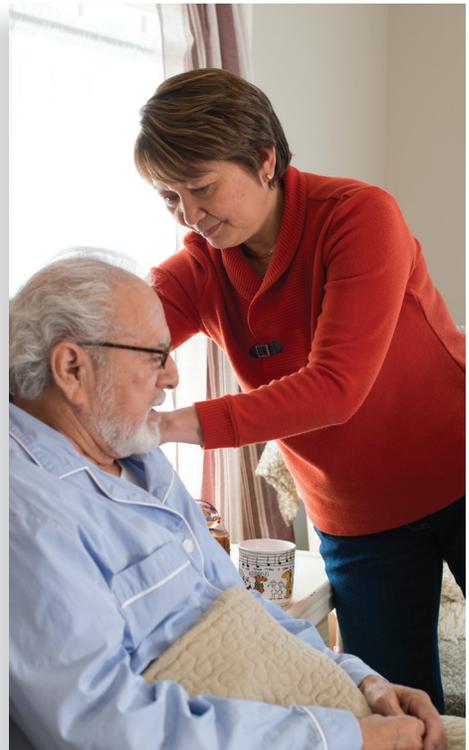
If you're having a hard time thinking about hospice care as a future option for your loved one, you may find comfort knowing this: Patients and families that have participated in hospice consistently report wishing they had gotten hospice care sooner, according to the Hospice Foundation of America. Thinking and talking about end-of-life care can be difficult. To prepare you for future planning and discussions, here are some helpful hospice facts.

What Is Hospice?

Comfort and dignity are at the heart of hospice care. The Hospice Foundation of American defines hospice as “medical care to help someone with a terminal illness live as well as possible for as long as possible, increasing quality of life.” Hospice typically provides support and care during the final stages of a terminal illness or another condition that makes death imminent, such as cancer, heart disease, emphysema and advanced dementia.

With hospice care, as opposed to traditional medical settings, a patient's emotional and even spiritual needs receive attention along with his or her physical needs, which might include helping to manage nausea, pain or shortness of breath. That care is provided by a hospice team, which typically includes nurses, social workers, physicians and possibly chaplains or other religious officiants, if desired. Family caregivers often remain at the center of this team.

Many are surprised to learn that hospice care does not necessarily mean the end of the road. Patients who go into remission from cancer or show improvement in other conditions can stop hospice and resume treatment in another medical setting.



Are All Hospices Similar?

Yes and no. Of the thousands of hospices in the United States, most participate in Medicare, which means they're required to provide certain services to patients. Beyond that core similarity, however, hospices vary greatly. They might be nonprofit, for-profit, independent or affiliated with a hospital. Hospice facilities differ from one another as well. For example, some feel homey while others feel more like a hospital. That's why it's a good idea to explore several options when you're ready to start thinking about hospice care.

How Will We Know When It's Time for Hospice?

All situations are different, but generally speaking, it may be time to consider hospice if the person you're caring for is rapidly declining despite medical treatment, is choosing to forego life-prolonging treatments, or when the physician thinks that he or she has six months or less to live. (See "Does Medicare cover hospice?" about eligibility for Medicare patients.)

How Can Hospice Help Me As a Caregiver?

A wonderful aspect of most hospice care is that it provides support for caregivers and other family members throughout the duration of a loved one's hospice care. The Hospice Foundation of America says that caregivers are given information, practical tips and strategies "to help them manage the considerable burden of caregiving."

Does Medicare Cover Hospice?

Yes. Patients with Medicare are eligible for 90 days of hospice coverage that can be renewed without limits — but only if two doctors deem it unlikely they will live for more than six months.

Medicare-certified hospice care is available at four different levels:

1. Routine home care:

This is the most common level of hospice care. The patient is usually stable and the care is provided in the patient's home.

2. General inpatient care:

This is crisis-like level of care for short-term management of severe pain, usually provided in a hospital or skilled nursing facility.

3. Continuous home care:

Similar to the above, but usually provided in the home.

4. Respite care:

This level of care provides temporary relief to a caregiver and is tied to the caregiver's needs, not to the patient's symptoms. Typically, this care is provided in an inpatient facility for up to five days.

How Do We Choose the Best Hospice Option?

This list of questions from Medicare can help guide you through the process of finding the right hospice care option for your loved one. Consider the following:

- ✓ Does the hospice accept my care recipient's insurance? What services and treatments will be covered?
- ✓ How will the hospice team keep me and my family informed?
- ✓ Where are hospice services provided?
- ✓ Will we be involved in making care decisions?
- ✓ Will the hospice provide a hospital bed and other medical equipment?
- ✓ Can my care recipient still see his or her regular doctor on hospice? If yes, how will that care be coordinated?
- ✓ Will my loved one have the same hospice nurse? What other members of the hospice team might be a part of the care?
- ✓ How will the hospice team prepare us for what to expect?
- ✓ How many patients are assigned to each hospice nurse?
- ✓ Can we speak with other caregivers to learn of their experience with the hospice?
- ✓ Does the hospice have help after business hours? Nights? Weekends? Holidays?
- ✓ What support services are offered by the hospice? What are our options if we need a break from providing care?
- ✓ If I call with an urgent need, how long will it take for someone from the hospice team to respond?
- ✓ How will the hospice team support us emotionally through the grieving process?
- ✓ How will the hospice team manage pain or other symptoms that arise?

If you have more questions about hospice or want to start exploring it as an option for your loved one, speak with their medical team. The more you are aware of the many benefits of hospice, the more you can help your loved one to take advantage of this compassionate, high-quality care when the timing is right.

HELP WITH HOSPICE CARE

What Services Are Available with Hospice?

If a hospice agency is Medicare-certified, it is expected to make the following services available:

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|  Nursing care |  Hospice aide and homemaker services |
|  Social worker services |  Medical equipment and supplies |
|  Doctor/physician assistant services |  Prescription drugs for symptom control |
|  Dietary counseling |  Physical and occupational therapy |
|  Speech-language pathology services |  Grief and loss counseling |

Sources:

What is hospice?

<https://hospicefoundation.org/Hospice-Care/Hospice-Services>

NHPCO releases updated edition of hospice facts and figures report

<https://www.nhpc.org/nhpc-releases-updated-edition-of-hospice-facts-and-figures-report/>

Caregiving: What can you do for your loved one now?

<https://hospicefoundation.org/Hospice-Care/Caregiving>

Good things to know about hospice

<https://www.medicare.gov/hospicecompare/#goodtoknow>

Suggested questions to ask when choosing a hospice

www.medicare.gov/hospicecompare/scripts/PDF/HospiceChecklist-Final-Clean.pdf

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