



What is Palliative Care?

Palliative care is a special type of health care that is focused on relieving the suffering, distress or burden that usually results from a serious chronic illness. Its goal is to enable both the patient and family to have the best possible quality of life that circumstances allow during the course of the illness.

Palliative care is needed by almost everyone with a chronic illness like cancer, HIV, heart failure, chronic lung disease, kidney disease, cirrhosis of the liver, or chronic diseases of the brain or nerves. It can be provided from the time that such a diagnosis is first made.

Who Provides Palliative Care?

Palliative care treatments and services are provided by a team that includes different types of health care professionals, such as doctors, nurses, social workers, chaplains, and others.

These treatments and services may be managed by the primary care doctor and others who work in the doctor's office, or they may be managed by a specialist in palliative care, who may work with a team of specialists.

How Do Palliative Care Teams Help?

Palliative care includes many treatments and services, like medicines for pain and other symptoms, treatments for emotional distress, care for family problems or for spiritual distress, services to help at home, and more.

Palliative care teams understand the importance of discussions with the patient and family about a person's health care choices, especially when an illness is very serious. The team helps to make sure that the patient and family understand the illness, so that the patient can make the best decisions about what kind of care he or she wants. They also encourage each patient to choose someone who would make decisions for them if he or she became unable to speak for themselves.

Palliative care is often needed from the first time that a serious illness is diagnosed, but the need for palliative care treatments and services usually increases when the chronic illness is in an advanced stage.

If the patient is approaching the end of life, palliative care makes certain that dying happens with as little suffering as possible and in a way that respects the patient and family.

Palliative care includes treatments and services that support good care at the end of a person's life, and it is at this time that specialists in palliative care are often called in to help.

What's the Difference Between Palliative Care and Hospice?

Palliative care is a special type of health care, which may be provided by your physician or others who work in the doctor's office, or may be provided by one or more specialists at any time during the course of a serious illness. Specialists in palliative care may work in hospitals or nursing homes, or in home care.

Hospice is a special benefit that is paid for by Medicaid, Medicare, and private health insurance that offers specialist palliative care to eligible patients with advanced illness. Hospice programs offer a full array of treatments and services to patients living at home, in a nursing home, or other facility. These services include:

- Visits by a nurse, social worker, and chaplain, and sometimes by a doctor who works for the hospice

- Visits by other professionals, such as a physical therapist, speech and language therapist, and nutritionist, if needed
- Access to a home health aide during part of the week
- Access to hospice volunteers
- Access to inpatient care managed by the hospice, if the patient has a problem that cannot be managed at home
- All medications related to the patient's main illness
- All supplies and equipment needed by the patient to deal with the main illness
- Support for the family

All of these treatments and services can be provided to a patient enrolled in hospice at no cost to the patient or family. There is no deductible, no co-pay and no co-insurance required for this benefit.

A patient is eligible for hospice if two physicians determine that the patient has a terminal illness and that life expectancy is measured in months. Every two or three months a physician must re-evaluate the patient for eligibility. As long as the patient remains eligible for the benefits, they can continue indefinitely.

Patients who choose hospice can still see their own physicians. They can quit hospice whenever they like, and re-enroll if still eligible. If the physician determines that a patient is no longer eligible, they can still get their regular health insurance benefits.

How Can I Learn More About Palliative Care?

If you're interested in learning if palliative care may help you, or you would like to discuss hospice, ask your doctor or your loved one's doctor.

Patient Education Series

What is Palliative Care?

If you would like help in connecting with resources, talk to the doctor, nurse or social worker at your health center.