



# Palliative care Info-sheet for seniors

Palliative care is a special kind of health care for individuals and families who are living with a life-threatening illness, usually at an advanced stage. This information sheet answers some of the questions seniors frequently ask about palliative care (sometimes called hospice care). It also suggests where seniors can learn more about the services available.

## What is palliative care?

The goal of palliative care is to provide the best quality of life for the critically or terminally ill by ensuring their comfort and dignity.

Many cancer patients receive palliative care, as do others coping with advanced heart, respiratory and kidney disease, Alzheimer Disease, AIDS, multiple sclerosis, etc.

An important objective of palliative care is the relief of pain and other symptoms. Palliative care is planned to meet not only physical needs but also the psychological, social, cultural, emotional and spiritual needs of the ill person and his or her family.

*A “family” is whoever a person says his or her family is. It can include spouse/partner, relatives and friends.*

## What is involved in palliative care?

### ***Pain management***

People living with a life-threatening illness may experience pain.

Health care providers work with seniors and their families to identify the source of the pain and ways to relieve it. Pain may be managed with drugs or by other means such as massage therapy and relaxation techniques.

### ***Symptom management***

Often people have to deal with a variety of other symptoms. These can include loss of appetite, nausea, weakness, breathing difficulty, bowel and bladder problems and confusion.

Palliative care can help relieve these symptoms, which can be very distressing for the individual.

### ***Social, psychological, emotional and spiritual support***

Palliative care focuses on the person as a whole by offering a wide range of support services to the ill person.

It also offers bereavement support and can help the family work through emotions and grief regarding the illness and death of a loved one.



## **Caregiver support**

Seniors may be concerned about whether they will be able to cope, especially when the person they are caring for is living at home.

Palliative care services that help the family cope include:

- advice and assistance from health care providers such as nurses and doctors who are skilled in providing palliative care;
- instruction on how to care for the person (how to give medication, prevent skin problems, recognize signs, call for help, etc.);
- home support services that provide assistance with household tasks such as meal preparation, shopping and transportation;
- relief for the caregiver. Sometimes a volunteer stays with the person so the family caregiver can go out. In other situations, the person who is ill may go to a day program or enter a hospital or long-term care facility for a short period of time.

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## **Who provides palliative care?**

The palliative care team is determined by the needs of the ill person and his/her family.

It often includes nurses and a physician with specialized palliative care skills, the family physician, a social worker, a spiritual counsellor and a pharmacist. Other health professionals such as nutritionists,

physiotherapists, occupational therapists and home support workers may be added to the team, as needed.

Volunteers can also play an important role in palliative care, providing support services such as companionship, relief for the caregiver and transportation.

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## **Where do people receive palliative care?**

Palliative care is offered in a variety of places — at home, in long-term facilities, in hospitals, and occasionally in hospices. Individuals and their families need to know about the choices they have.

### ***At home***

Palliative care is often provided in people's homes through home care programs. These programs offer professional nursing care and a variety of home support services.

Other services may be available in some communities to help people to remain at home. These can include volunteer services; day programs offered for the ill family member in a variety of places in the community; pain and symptom management teams; and 24-hour response teams that help with urgent needs on a short-term basis.

Being at home allows people to remain close to their families and live as normally as possible. Some people feel that when they are at home they have more freedom to make choices about their care.



There may be situations where people cannot stay at home or choose not to remain at home to receive palliative care. Other options are available.

### ***In long-term care facilities***

Long-term care facilities such as nursing homes may also offer palliative care services.

It is sometimes necessary for residents who need more specialized palliative care services to enter hospital.

### ***In hospitals***

Some hospitals have specialized units dedicated to palliative care. Others set aside a certain number of beds in different hospital units for people needing palliative care.

Hospitals who have a palliative care team, composed of health professionals specialized in this type of care, can help other staff provide palliative care in the unit where the ill person is staying.

### ***In hospices***

In Canada, there are only a few residential hospices — separate buildings or apartments in the community where palliative care is provided in a home-like setting. Some people move into such hospices to receive palliative care on a 24-hour basis.

## **Who pays for palliative care?**

Palliative care is paid for in different ways across the country. It is important that people requiring palliative care and their families find out as soon as possible who pays for what and what additional financial assistance may be available.

Who pays often depends on whether care is being provided at home or in the hospital.

Palliative care costs at home may be covered by the provincial health plan as part of a home care program. These plans do not always include the cost of drugs and equipment used at home. Some allow only a certain number of paid hours of professional and home support services. After the hours are used up, people need to look for other ways to pay.

People may use private insurance or their own money to pay for palliative care services at home. Some may receive assistance from social agencies, service clubs, local cancer societies and other similar organizations.

Palliative care provided in a hospital is usually paid for by provincial health plans. These plans usually cover most care including drugs, medical supplies and equipment while the person is in the hospital.

In long-term care facilities, residents are usually required to pay for some of their care. Costs vary among facilities.

There is usually no charge for bereavement support. It is often provided as part of palliative care services offered in hospitals or by non-profit or volunteer organizations in the community.



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## How can I find out about palliative care services available in my community?

You can obtain information from your family doctor or specialist, home care nurse, hospital social worker, spiritual counsellor, national, provincial or local palliative care association. Also contact your local seniors' groups, the Cancer Society or other organizations concerned with specific diseases such as heart disease, Alzheimer Disease, AIDS.

### USEFUL ADDRESSES:

- **Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association**  
Cambridge Street North  
Ottawa, Ontario K1R 7A5  
(613) 241-3663 or 1-800-668-2785  
[www.chpca.net](http://www.chpca.net)
- **Canadian Cancer Society**  
10 Alcorn Avenue, # 200  
Toronto, Ontario M4V 3B1  
(416) 961-7223  
[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)
- **Canadian AIDS Society**  
309 Cooper Street, 4th Floor  
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0G5  
(613) 230-3580  
[www.cdnaids.ca](http://www.cdnaids.ca)
- **Alzheimer Society of Canada**  
1200 - 20 Eglinton Avenue West  
Toronto, Ontario M4R 1K8  
(416) 488-8772 or 1-800-616-8816  
[www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca)

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## How can I make my wishes known about my care?

If you are facing a life-threatening illness, you should talk over your wishes with your family and let them know what you want.

You can also put your wishes in writing so that, in the event you are unable to say what you want, your family and health care providers will know. Such documents are called advance directives or living wills.

You can seek advice within your community about advance directives as the laws concerning them vary from province to province.

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## How can I find out more general information about palliative care?

Your public library may have material on palliative care. You can also call help lines such as the Cancer Information Service toll-free line at 1-888-939-3333, or (905) 387-1153.

An increasing number of Internet sites also provide information about palliative care.

*Division of Aging and Seniors  
Public Health Agency of Canada  
[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines)*

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