

Medications for Anxiety, Agitation, and Restlessness

What is happening

As illness progresses, patients may experience:

- Anxiety
- Agitation
- Restlessness
- Difficulty sleeping

These symptoms can be distressing and may make it harder to provide safe and comfortable care.

Why these medications are used

These medications help to:

- Reduce anxiety and emotional distress
- Decrease agitation and restlessness
- Improve comfort and sleep
- Allow safer care when symptoms are severe

In some cases, **severe agitation can lead to injury**, and medication may be necessary for safety.

What you may see

- Pacing or inability to stay still
- Restlessness or repeated movements
- Confusion or distress
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased anxiety or fear

What you can do

- Give medications as directed by the hospice team
- Use medications **early when symptoms begin**, rather than waiting until severe
- Provide a calm, quiet environment
- Stay with the patient if they are distressed, when possible

- Contact hospice if you are unsure how to proceed

Common medications

- Lorazepam (for anxiety)
- Haldol / Haloperidol (for agitation, restlessness)
- Seroquel / Quetiapine (for anxiety and agitation, often at night)

These medications are commonly used together with pain medications when needed.

How to give these medications

- Usually given **by mouth**
- Can be given:
 - **As needed** for symptoms
 - Or on a **regular schedule**
- Give with a small amount of fluid (if able)

If the patient cannot swallow:

- Some medications are available in **liquid form**
- Some can be given **under the skin (subcutaneous)** by the hospice team

When it should work

- Often begins working within **about 30 minutes**
- Some forms (liquid or alternative routes) may work more quickly

Possible side effects

- Sleepiness or increased sedation
- Fatigue or low energy
- Temporary confusion or forgetfulness
- Reduced alertness

These effects are often expected and may be part of keeping the patient comfortable.

When to call hospice

- The patient is **difficult or unable to wake**
- Agitation or restlessness is **worsening despite medication**
- New or unusual movements (muscle spasms, uncontrolled movements)
- Breathing becomes **slow, weak, or concerning**
- You are unsure how much or when to give medication