

Anxiety and Restlessness

What is happening

Anxiety and restlessness are very common in serious illness, especially during the last weeks or days of life.

Patients may appear:

- Worried or fearful
- Unable to relax
- Restless or agitated
- Unable to sleep
- Confused or distressed

These symptoms can be upsetting for both patients and caregivers.

Why this may be happening

There are many possible causes of anxiety or restlessness, including:

- Pain
- Shortness of breath
- Dehydration
- Constipation or difficulty urinating
- Medication side effects
- Lack of sleep
- Infection (especially if fever is present)

In patients with dementia, constipation or urinary retention can sometimes cause significant agitation.

Emotional causes may also contribute, including:

- Fear of death
- Depression
- Unresolved worries or conflicts

What you may see

- Pacing or repeated movements
- Pulling at clothing or bedding
- Difficulty settling down
- Increased confusion
- Calling out or appearing frightened
- Difficulty sleeping

What you can do first

Try to look for possible causes:

- Ask if the patient has pain
- Notice whether breathing seems more difficult
- Check for new physical symptoms
- Take the temperature if concerned about infection
- Ask about:
 - Last bowel movement
 - Difficulty urinating or decreased urine output

You can also gently ask:

“Is there something bothering you that you would like to talk about?”

Sometimes simply listening and providing reassurance can help.

Medications and treatment

Anxiety medications

Lorazepam is commonly included in the hospice comfort medication kit and is often used to reduce anxiety and restlessness.

Other medications may also be used, including:

- Haldol (haloperidol)
- Seroquel (quetiapine)

Use medications as directed by the hospice team.

Pain or shortness of breath treatment

Pain and shortness of breath are common causes of restlessness.

Morphine and other opioid medications may help:

- Relieve pain
- Reduce the feeling of shortness of breath
- Improve comfort

Emotional support

Some worries or emotional concerns may be difficult to discuss.

Hospice teams include professionals trained to help with:

- Emotional distress
- Fear and anxiety
- Difficult family or end-of-life conversations

When to call hospice

- Anxiety or restlessness is worsening
- Medications are not helping
- Breathing becomes more difficult
- Fever or infection is suspected
- Pain is increasing
- You are unsure what may be causing the symptoms
- The patient becomes difficult to comfort or keep safe