

Palliative Care and End-of-Life Planning

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Key concepts, goals, and practical steps for clinicians, patients, and families

1. Definitions

Term	Meaning
Palliative Care	Specialized medical care that focuses on relieving suffering, managing symptoms, and improving quality of life for patients with serious, life-limiting illnesses— at any stage of disease.
Hospice Care	A subset of palliative care for patients whose disease is advanced and who have a life expectancy ≤6 months and who choose to forego curative treatments.
End-of-Life (EOL) Planning	The process of discussing, documenting, and implementing a person's preferences for care, treatment, and personal matters as they approach the end of life.

2. Core Principles of Palliative Care

1. **Patient- and Family-Centered** – Care plans respect the values, goals, and cultural beliefs of the patient and their loved ones.
 2. **Whole-Person Approach** – Addresses physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and practical needs.
 3. **Interdisciplinary Team** – Physicians, nurses, social workers, chaplains, pharmacists, dietitians, and therapists collaborate.
 4. **Proactive Symptom Management** – Pain, dyspnea, nausea, delirium, constipation, anxiety, and depression are anticipated and treated early.
 5. **Communication** – Clear, honest, and compassionate dialogue about prognosis, options, and expectations.
 6. **Continuity of Care** – Seamless transition across settings (hospital, home, nursing facility, hospice).
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3. Symptom Management Overview

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Symptom	First-Line Options	Adjunct/Rescue Measures	Monitoring
Pain	Opioids (morphine, oxycodone) + non-opioid adjuvants (acetaminophen, NSAIDs)	Breakthrough dosing, nerve blocks	Pain scores q4-6h, side effects
Dyspnea	Low-dose opioids, supplemental O ₂ (if hypoxic)	Benzodiazepines, fan, positioning	Respiratory rate, SpO ₂
Nausea/Vomiting	5-HT ₃ antagonists, metoclopramide	Dexamethasone, haloperidol	N/V episodes, fluid balance
Delirium	Identify reversible causes; low-dose haloperidol or atypical antipsychotic	Environmental cues, sleep hygiene	CAM-ICU or Confusion Assessment Method
Constipation	Laxatives (polyethylene glycol), stool softeners	Enemas, stimulant laxatives	Bowel movements, abdominal exam
Anxiety/Depression	SSRIs (long-term), short-acting benzodiazepines for acute distress	Psychotherapy, spiritual counseling	PHQ-9/GAD-7 scores, safety assessment

4. Advance Care Planning (ACP)

4.1 Key Documents

Document	Content	Legal Status
Advance Directive (AD)	General instructions for future care (e.g., "I do not want mechanical ventilation").	Varies by jurisdiction; usually legally binding if witnessed.
Living Will	Specific preferences for life-sustaining treatments (CPR, ventilation, tube feeding).	Legally enforceable when signed.
Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care (Health Care Proxy)	Designates a surrogate decision-maker.	Recognized