

## Palliative Care – What Is It?

*“Palliative care is an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problem associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychosocial and spiritual.” (World Health Organization)*



It refers to specialized medical care for people with serious illnesses with a focus on providing patients with relief from the symptoms, pain and stress of a serious illness-whatever the prognosis. It focuses less on curing a patient’s underlying disease and more on caring for the whole person, seeking to lessen pain levels, stress, worry, and other concerns that get in the way of potential healing. It is offered by a team of physicians, nurses and other disciplines.

Palliative care is for anyone who has been diagnosed with a serious illness and may have symptoms from that illness or its treatment. The goal of the palliative care specialist is to reduce any signs and symptoms and provide comfort.

Palliative care is often confused with hospice care, which is generally for people with terminal illnesses. They are similar, but different. The main difference in hospice care versus palliative is that hospice is for people who are terminally ill and whose remaining lifespan is estimated at 6 months or less, and have typically chosen to forgo curative treatments. Hospice makes the patient comfortable and prepares the patient and the patient’s family for the patient’s end of life when it is determined treatment for the illness will no longer be pursued. Hospice does not use life-prolonging medications.

Palliative care is for people at any stage of a serious illness, and their condition does not have to be incurable, and the service can be employed while the patient is continuing active treatment through different phases of their illness. It focuses on relief from physical suffering. The patient may be being treated for a disease or may be living with a chronic disease, and may or may not be terminally ill. Life prolonging medications are used.

There are several benefits of palliative care including:

- helping to provide more control in the activities of daily life
- providing pain management from disease or effects of other medical conditions or side effects - an important part of palliative care
- helping with other symptoms such as fatigue, nausea, loss of appetite and shortness of breath
- dealing with stress
- offering support to caregiver and others

Palliative care efforts support:

- Seeking help from spiritual counselor, minister, priest
- counseling for emotional support
- breathing exercises, yoga, meditation
- Keeping a positive attitude and thinking
- Daily dose of humor and laughter

Palliative care also helps to coordinate and share information with other doctors and health providers. It is appropriate for anyone at any age and at any stage of serious illness –benefits are available as soon as a diagnosis is received or treatment is started.

Examples of illnesses that can be helped with palliative care include cancer, cardiac disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), dementia, Alzheimers, kidney failure, HIV/AIDS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and any serious disease or illness.

Keep in mind that palliative care is not the end of the road, many patients end up leaving palliative care and living for many more years.

Palliative care services require a physician referral, so speak with your doctor or primary care provider regarding a referral. Most private insurance plans, as well as Medicare and Medicaid, cover palliative care services in the hospital, in rehabilitation and in skilled nursing or hospice facilities. If you are covered by Medicaid, it may cover some palliative care treatments and medications, including visits from doctors.

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For more information, visit these websites:

*Mayo Clinic*

*Get Palliative Care.org*

*National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization*