Secretions (Noisy Respirations, Wet Respirations, Terminal Secretions)

At the end of life, there are certain symptoms that are commonly experienced no matter if the person is very young or very old. Though the symptoms may be similar, the management of care is individualized according to person’s wishes and goals. It is important to recognize symptoms early and make thorough assessments and observations in order for the symptoms to be best managed.

Noisy respirations (wet respirations, terminal secretions) may occur at the end of life. It is a buildup of saliva and/or mucous in the back of the throat. A person very close to death may be too weak to clear the secretions by coughing or swallowing. As a result, a loud rattling, gurgling, or bubbling sound occurs when the person breathes in and out. Noisy or wet respirations are not dangerous and are not uncomfortable for the person but may be distressing for the family to hear. Some may refer to this as the ‘death rattle,’ however this term should be avoided in front of the person/family or other caregivers as it may bring up strong emotions.

There are certain medications (anticholinergics) that may be ordered to decrease and dry the secretions. Suctioning the back of the throat is not recommended as this may increase secretions and may cause discomfort to the person.

Signs and Symptoms
- Noisy or wet breathing
- Presence of secretions in the mouth or back of throat. Drooling of secretions
- Rattling, bubbling, gurgling or congested sound with breathing in and out

What can be done?
- Elevate the head of the bed. If the person is able, reposition to side-lying
- Perform oral hygiene as needed
- Provide a calm environment
- Support the family and provide reassurance that noisy respirations are not distressing to the person
- Report any changes in the breathing pattern or condition to the healthcare team

Conclusion
Noisy respirations (wet respirations, terminal secretions) may occur at the end of life. Noisy respirations are not dangerous and are not uncomfortable for the person but may be distressing for the family to hear. It is important to report any changes in condition to the healthcare team.
References


Coyne P, Chrastek J. “Symptom Management from Strollers to Walkers and Everything in Between.” Presentation at the HPNA 5th Annual Clinical Practice Forum, Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association; Sep 16-17, 2011: Pittsburgh, PA.

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