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What is Hospice Care?

Hospice is a specific type of “palliative care” which focuses on comfort driven care and pain relief, not curing. While palliative care may be available for patients at any stage of an illness, hospice care is for those with “a life-limiting illness,” in other words, people who are unlikely to live for more than six months. Its goal is to give the patient control, dignity and comfort and ensure that the final months of life are as good as possible. It helps patients and their family members plan for the care that will be afforded during “end-of-life,” and guides them through the health care system.

What does hospice include?

Pain and symptom relief, bereavement counseling for family members and loved ones, assistance in organizing financial affairs and help navigating the healthcare system.

Who provides hospice?

Hospice care is provided by doctors, who are specially trained in palliative medicine, together with a team of care givers that may include nurses, social workers, chaplains, physical therapists, dietitians, volunteers and others. Typically, the hospice physician collaborates with the patient’s primary physician to coordinate care.

When should one apply?

Hospice services are for patients with a wide range of life-limiting illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, congestive heart failure, lung disease, and neurological disorders such as Alzheimer’s disease and dementia. Any person who likely has six months or less to live qualifies for hospice care. Unfortunately, too often people wait until death is imminent – weeks or even days away – before seeking hospice, missing out on months of helpful care for themselves and their loved ones. There are two primary requirements, that the patient have a life-limiting illness and that they no longer seek curative treatment for that illness.

Where is hospice available?

Hospice is available nationwide. It is usually provided at home but it can also be provided in hospitals, nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

Does insurance cover hospice care?

Many private insurance plans and health maintenance organizations (HMOs) offer hospice and palliative care benefits. Medicare offers the full scope of hospice benefits including medication for pain and symptom management, doctor visits, counseling, and other hospice services. It is important to understand that once hospice is requested, Medicare does not cover the cost of aggressive treatment intended to cure illness. Medicaid recipients are also covered for hospice and palliative care.

How does one access hospice?

Anyone can request hospice services at any time. The hospice staff will then contact the patient's primary care physician to determine if hospice is appropriate and work with the patient to provide care. Hospice does not require a specific diagnosis. If you or a loved one could benefit from hospice care, ask your doctor to refer you to a hospice and palliative doctor or hospice organization.