



PALLIATIVE CARE

While it's impossible to plan for every aspect of life, it is feasible to consider the type of care you might choose if you were to become seriously ill.

According to the Journal of the American Medical Association, palliative care teams are seeing patients with more diverse diagnoses. They are seeing them earlier in their illnesses, ultimately helping to improve their quality of life.

Patients receiving palliative services report a significant improvement of their symptoms as quickly as their second visit with the palliative team. From advanced care planning to symptom management, a palliative care clinician can play an integral role in your care when facing a serious illness.

What is Palliative Care?

An often misunderstood care option is the concept of palliative care. This is a system of care that provides medical, social, emotional, and practical support to patients and their families during a serious illness. These illnesses include, but are not limited to, cancer, the effects of a stroke, kidney disease, liver disease, multiple sclerosis, dementia, Parkinson's disease, heart failure, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Palliative care is provided by a specially trained team that includes doctors and nurses and others such as social workers, nutritionists and chaplains.

The goal of palliative care is to assist patients and their families by improving their quality of life and helping with symptoms. Caregivers can also help patients understand medical treatment choices and relieve anxiety and stress experienced by patients and loved ones.

Palliative is not hospice care. A major difference between the two is that palliative care does not replace medical treatments. It occurs in addition to curative treatments such as chemotherapy or surgery. Hospice care, intended to make the most of remaining time, is provided for patients who are expected to die within six months and who no longer benefit from curative treatment or have chosen to forego further treatment.

Who Might Benefit from Palliative Care?

The number of Americans ages 65 and older is projected to nearly double between 2018 and 2060 – rising to 23% of the total population. As more people face serious illness as they approach the end of their lives, experts say many could benefit from palliative care.

Because of its interdisciplinary approach, palliative care looks different depending on the needs of each patient and caregiver. For instance, when treating a patient who has dementia, a palliative care team is likely to work with the primary care physician to manage the patient's confusion while identifying community resources such as a home health aide to help and support caregivers.

The team would take a different approach when treating someone who has been diagnosed with cancer—collaborating with cancer doctors to manage pain and address side effects of treatment while also consulting with a chaplain to help the patient with spiritual needs related to the disease.

Palliative care is available to all patients suffering from a serious disease, regardless of prognosis, age, disease stage, or treatment type. It works in conjunction with curative treatments and can begin right after a patient is diagnosed. Palliative care provides an extra layer of support for patients and their families. It has been shown to improve quality of life, reduce distress and discomfort, and help patients live longer.

A study that compared patients suffering from metastatic non-small-cell lung cancer showed those who received palliative care in addition to cancer treatment had lower rates of depression and lived an average of three months longer than those who received only cancer treatments.

How to Access Palliative Care

If you or a loved one is diagnosed with a serious illness, you can request a palliative care referral from your primary care doctor or a specialty care doctor, such as an oncologist.

The number of hospitals with palliative care teams has grown tremendously in the past 20 years, increasing from 7% in 2001 to 72% in 2019 among hospitals with 50 or more beds. Still, not every hospital offers this type of care, and its availability varies from state to state.

Palliative care is usually delivered in a hospital setting but can also be given at a patient's home or in a long-term care facility. Some hospital systems offer outpatient palliative care clinics, so you can check to see what's available. If you don't have access to this type of care, you can ask your doctor to discuss palliative or hospice needs with you.

Medicare and Medicare Advantage plans cover most palliative care services, and many private insurers also provide coverage. Medicaid coverage varies from state to state.

The Center to Advance Palliative Care, provides an online Palliative Care Provider Directory to help patients and families locate care in their area.

Stanford School of Medicine – Palliative Care. "Where do Americans Die?"

Accessed at <https://palliative.stanford.edu/home-hospice-home-care-of-the-dying-patient/where-do-americans-die>

Harvard Health Publishing – Harvard Medical School. "What is palliative care, and who can benefit from it?"

Accessed at <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/what-is-palliative-care-and-who-can-benefit-from-it-2019111118186>

National Library of Medicine. "Early palliative care for patient with metastatic non-small-cell lung cancer."

Accessed at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20818875>

Center to Advance Palliative Care. "America's Care of Serious Illness."

Accessed at <https://reportcard.capc.org>



Utilizing ConnectCare3

ConnectCare3's Nurse Navigators can help you navigate the complex healthcare system when facing a difficult diagnosis. Many critical illnesses require the care of multiple specialists, sometimes including palliative care, and our Nurse Navigators are here to support you in coordinating that care and ensuring your healthcare needs are met.

Additionally, ConnectCare3's patient advocates can provide assistance in researching palliative care physician options for you to consider if you are in need of a provider.