

Terminal Secretions



What are Terminal Secretions

Terminal secretions are the cause of noisy breathing, commonly known as “death rattle.” It is the sound caused when air moves over pooled secretions in the back of the throat. Secretions collect when patients are less responsive and no longer swallowing normally. Normal respiratory mucous can also pool in the lungs as the cough reflex diminishes. Terminal secretions are common and occur in approximately one third to one half of patients. It is important to remember, as distressing as it is for family and care givers to hear, it is not distressing to the patient. Because of reduced consciousness, patients are not bothered by the sound of their breathing.

Signs and Symptoms

- Fluids may collect in the throat or lungs
- Loud breathing sounds, may be described as gurgling, rattling, or snoring
- Patient less responsive and is frequently unresponsive

Management

- Reposition to side lying with head elevated
- Reduce fluid intake
- Occasional oral suctioning may be helpful

Treatment

- Atropine 1% solution_____
- Other medications_____

It may be difficult to eliminate the noisy breathing that results from terminal secretions.

What should I communicate to the hospice team?

- Rapid or labored breathing
- Changes in skin color, especially in the hands and feet
- Restlessness
- Decreased urine output, darkening of urine color

These are all changes that may indicate your loved one is nearing death. Your team is here to support you in this time.

If you need help with your symptoms, call VNA 24hrs a day:

214-689-0000