

[Track 9: Signs of Approaching Death]

[Narrator]

While many of us don't want to talk about our death – or even think about it – others are curious as to how it actually happens. What are the signs that death is approaching? Does it always happen the same way, or is it different for each of us? Will there be noises that could frighten my loved ones if they are in the room? Is there information to help my family and loved ones know what's happening and that death is near?

Dr. William Lamers, a medical consultant with the Hospice Foundation of America, has written extensively about the signs of approaching death, and has an easy to understand list of these signs on the Foundation's website (www.hospicefoundation.org). He begins the list by noting this is a general picture of the dying process, and there will be differences from person to person. The list describes the most common physical signs of a body's last moments:

- The most obvious sign is a decrease in activity: less movement, less speaking, less interest in surroundings, less interest in food and water.
- Body temperature lowers by a degree or more.
- Blood pressure begins to gradually fall.
- Circulation to the arms and legs decreases so that the hands and feet begin to feel cool compared to the rest of the body.
- Breathing changes from a normal rate and rhythm to a new pattern of several rapid breaths followed by a period of no respiration. (This is known as Cheyne-Stokes respiration, named after the two doctors who first described it.)
- Skin color changes from normal to a duller, darker, grayish hue.
- The fingernail beds become bluish rather than the normal pink.
- Speaking decreases.
- The person ceases to respond to questions and no longer spontaneously speaks.
- The person goes into a coma that may last from minutes to days before death occurs.

He goes on to say that “a person in a coma may still hear what is said even when he or she no longer seems to respond to verbal or even painful stimuli. Those who are nearby should always act as if the person is aware of what is going on and is able to hear and understand.” As hearing is the last sense to leave, anyone in the room at this time may want to tell favorite stories, sing or play music, pray, or say anything that you don't want left unsaid.

If you would like more information about these final moments, contact Caring Connections at 800-658- 8898 or www.caringinfo.org, or by email, at consumers@nhpco.org. You can also order *The Dying Process: A Guide for Caregivers* from the Hospice Foundation of America (hospicefoundation.org). More information about how to contact these groups can be found in the Resource Booklet.