

Infections and the Use of Antibiotics in Dying Patients

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What to think about if you are concerned that you or your loved one has an infection.

Why are infections more common in those near the end of life?

- ✓ Decreased immune functioning.
- ✓ Immobility.
- ✓ Use of Foley catheters to drain the bladder.
- ✓ Incomplete emptying of the bladder.
- ✓ Weak cough.
- ✓ Decreased ability to protect the lungs.

How to know an infection is present?

- ✓ Fever, chills, change in alertness, confusion.
- ✓ Painful or frequent urination.
- ✓ Cloudy and foul smelling urine.
- ✓ Difficulty breathing.
- ✓ Cough.

Note: In many cases these same symptoms represent the normal progression of illness.

What are the possible benefits of antibiotics at the end of life?

- ✓ Improve the symptoms of an infection and improve quality of life.
- ✓ Prolong life in some cases.

What are the risks and burdens of antibiotics?

- ✓ Need to take pills or administer injections.
- ✓ Diarrhea or yeast infections of the skin, mouth, or vagina.
- ✓ Prolongation of dying.

Recommendations

Meet with your treating physician and/or nurse and review the following areas.

- ✓ Reassess the goals of treatment.
 - ✓ Is comfort the highest goal?
 - ✓ Is the goal to maximize quantity of life, or quality of life?
- ✓ Evaluate overall prognosis.
 - ✓ Is your loved one already nearing their last days of life?
 - ✓ Are the changes seen caused by an infection or by the underlying disease?
- ✓ Determine the potential benefits and burdens of antibiotics?
 - ✓ Will antibiotics likely prolong life or decrease symptoms?
 - ✓ How will they be administered and what side effects are likely?
- ✓ Can the symptoms be treated by other means?
 - ✓ Would morphine be effective for breathing problems or Tylenol for fever?

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