
Managing Restlessness

What is restlessness?

- An inability to rest, relax or concentrate
- Extreme restlessness is sometimes called agitation
- A condition that occurs in nearly half of all patients during the last 48 hours of life

What are signs of restlessness?

- Muscle twitching
- Moving around without a known reason
- Pulling at sheets, covers or clothing
- Trying to get out of bed for no known reason
- Fidgeting
- Sleeplessness
- Inability to get comfortable
- Grimacing

What to report to the hospice/palliative care team?

- Any of the signs or behaviors listed above
- Inability to administer medications by prescribed method
- Things that make the restlessness worse, for example: loud music
- Things that make the restlessness better, for example: soft music
- Concerns that you may have as a caregiver to cope
- Need for spiritual support
- Situations that might be unsafe

What can be done for restlessness?

The team will try to find the reason for the restlessness and talk with you about treatments.

Things you can do:

- Administer prescribed medications as ordered
- Offer frequent reassurance
- Offer relaxation activities, for example: play soothing music
- Keep things calm, for example: decrease numbers of visitors
- Read favorite stories, poems, etc. in a calm voice
- Hold the person's hand, give them a gentle massage
- Keep the person safe, for example: do not leave the person alone while restless and check frequently when calm
- Understand that restlessness may be a sign that the patient is close to death – let other family members know what is happening

Other HPNA Teaching Sheets on are available at www.HPNA.org.

Reference

Core Curriculum for the Generalist Hospice and Palliative Nurse. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company; 2010.

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