

Understanding Withdrawal of Life-Sustaining Therapies

During this difficult time, you may be struggling with what to do next and may be considering withdrawal of artificial means of life. It is important to consider what your loved one would have wanted and to carry out their wishes.

What does withdrawal of life-sustaining therapies mean?

Withdrawal of life-sustaining therapies is the removal of treatments, including ventilators, medications and other assistive devices, that prolong life. The decision to withdraw care is difficult, but it is important to understand that you are not “pulling a plug”; in fact, these therapies may prolong the dying process.

Why should I withdraw life-sustaining therapies?

Withdrawing artificial life support generally occurs after hospital staff have informed you that your loved one does not have a chance of meaningful recovery. All treatment efforts have been attempted and no other medical interventions can be done to improve your loved one’s condition.

Withdrawal of life-sustaining therapies is also considered when someone has previously made their wishes known, either through conversation or advanced directive, that they do not want to be kept alive by artificial means.

When should I withdraw life-sustaining therapies?

The decision to withdraw life-sustaining therapies is made in collaboration with medical staff. It is important that everyone who wishes to say goodbye to your loved one has the opportunity to do so. Nursing staff are able to facilitate a chaplain or spiritual support, should you request it.

What to expect

After you have made the decision to withdraw life-sustaining therapies, nursing staff may need time to prepare. Throughout this process, the medical team will help your loved one remain comfortable and will discontinue supportive therapies and medications that have kept your loved one stable.

Once all life-sustaining therapies have been discontinued, it is difficult to predict how long it will take for your loved one to pass away. You are able to stay with your loved one as long as you like. Some families choose not to be present for this process; it is entirely a personal decision.

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Physical changes in your loved one are normal and to be expected. These are signs of the body's reaction to the final stages of life. However, the dying process is an individual experience; your loved one may or may not experience the following:

- Change in breathing pattern, including lack of breathing
- Skin cool to the touch
- Bluish coloration to lips and skin
- Fluctuation in vital signs (heart rate, blood pressure, oxygenation level)
- Secretions that thicken and build up in the lungs or back of the throat