



MANAGING RESTLESSNESS AND AGITATION

What is Restlessness or Agitation?

Restlessness is an inability to rest, relax, or concentrate. It is a very common symptom at the end of life, particularly in the last days to hours. Extreme restlessness is sometimes called “agitation.”

Signs and Symptoms of Restlessness:

- Inability to get comfortable; moving around without a known reason
- Sleeplessness
- Trying to get out of bed for no known reason
- Grimacing or muscle twitching
- Pulling at sheets, blankets or clothing
- Reaching out or grabbing for things in the air

Tell Your Care Team About:

- Any signs or behaviors of the patient listed above
- If the patient cannot swallow medications
- Situations that could be unsafe, such as the potential for the patient falling out of bed
- Things that make the restlessness worse or better, like loud music or the sounds of familiar voices
- Practical concerns that you may have as caregiver
- The need for emotional or spiritual support for the patient or caregiver

Your Care Team will work with you to understand the patient’s restlessness and offer treatments and support. **Know that you are not alone; these signs of restlessness are not unusual.**

How You Can Help:

Manage the Patient’s Care Environment:

- Keep the patient safe. Make sure the environment is arranged to prevent falls or injuries.
- Create a peaceful, soothing care setting, without loud noise. If the patient enjoys it, play familiar, soothing music.
- Maintain a comfortable room temperature, neither too warm nor too cold.
- Keep a nightlight on at night and keep familiar objects nearby.
- ALWAYS ask permission before touching the patient; tell the person what you are doing as you do it.



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For Restlessness:

- Reassure the patient frequently. Stay calm and do not distress the patient with your own anxiety about their restlessness.
- Monitor the restless person; do not leave them alone if they are potentially unsafe.
- Offer relaxation activities if the patient is alert and oriented.
- Maintain a calm, supportive care environment, according to what soothes the patient.
- Read favorite stories, poems, or play the patient's favorite music.
- Provide gentle massage, comforting touches, or other things to calm the patient.
- Restlessness may be a sign that the patient is close to death. Ask your Care Team members for help with education and support as needed.

For Sudden Onset Agitation:

- Notify your Care Team
- Remind the patient about time, place, and who they are, when appropriate. However, don't argue with them.
- Provide glasses and/or hearing aids if the patient uses them safely.
- Remind the patient who you are when you assist them. Tell them everything you are going to do *before* you do it, For example, "I am going to help you sit up in bed now."
- Avoid asking a lot of questions or offering complex choices.
- Offer spoken reassurances such as "I am right here with you."
- Offer spiritual support when appropriate.
- Try to maintain the normal routine and structure. Try to maintain comfortable eating and drinking habits.
- Encourage the patient to stay awake during the day in order to sleep better at night.
- Explain to visitors that the unusual behavior is likely due to the patient's medical condition.

For Dementia:

- Treat the patient with respect and compassion. Do not embarrass or shame them by treating them like a child. Don't talk about them like they aren't there if they are.
- Don't use words like "honey," "sweetie," etc. unless this is how the patient has always wanted to be addressed.
- Be patient with unusual or strange behavior. Stay calm and reassuring.
- Provide physical affection. Try touching, gestures and eye contact.
- Show your own feelings appropriately. The patient may better understand your emotions and presence than your words.
- Even if the patient's doesn't make sense, try to understand their *emotions* and *feelings*. Patients with dementia often react to situations on an emotional level. Keep in mind that you may not understand everything. You can only do your best.



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- Offer explanation before helping the patient. Tell them what you are going to do before you do it. “I’m going to help you take a bath now.”
- Resist the impulse to overly control the patient’s behavior. You can help the patient maintain their self-esteem by allowing them to do as much of their own care as possible.
- Set limits kindly. Behaviors may have meaning to the patient even if they don’t make sense to you. Try to move to a new activity when the patient becomes stressed.
- Keep tasks simple. Have the patient do only one thing at a time.
- Create a daily routine with small rituals. These can include prayers, washing hands or preparing food. Try not to do too little or too much.
- Include former habits and memories. Provide the patient with things to hold that represent a part of his/her life. These can include pictures, clothing, or anything of meaning to the patient.
- Watch for situations that could result in aggression. Patients with dementia can become violent and may throw things or try to hit. Be aware of your own personal safety.
- Take care of yourself! Caring for someone with dementia is very demanding. The sooner you accept help, the longer you can continue to help the patient.

For all types of Restlessness and Agitation:

- Give medications to the patient as instructed by the Care Team.
- Restlessness or agitation may be a sign that the patient is close to death. Help other family members understand what is happening.
- Ask your Care Team members for help with education and support as needed.

Need more information or help? Call 633-3400 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to get live help. Thank you for letting us help care for you and your loved ones.