
Summary

The patient's regular breathing patterns may change as he/she approaches death. A particular pattern consists of shallow, irregular breathing with periods of no breathing (apnea) for 5 to 30 seconds or longer. This is called "Cheyne-stokes" breathing. The patient may also experience periods of rapid, shallow pant-like breathing. Elevating the head and/or turning the person on his/her side may bring comfort.

Family members are often confused by the presence of apnea. They will often listen and wait for each breath to be the last, only to have breathing resume after 5 to 30 seconds or longer. Hospice professionals educate the family on Cheyne-stokes respirations and provide support at this time, through the institution of a vigil of hospice staff and volunteers.