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Noisy, Rattling Breathing



Respiratory Tract Secretions

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What causes noisy breathing?

A rattling or gurgling sound is created as air moves over a very small amount of saliva (fluid) sitting just above the patient's windpipe.

This kind of moist breathing is a normal sign during the dying phase.

It may sound a bit frightening, but it is usually not distressing to the patient – they are not drowning or choking to death.

Who is likely to have noisy breathing?

Patients most at risk of moist respirations are those who have

- Lung cancer
- Chest infections, such as pneumonia
- Brain tumours
- Head and neck cancers
- Lung diseases, such as asthma, bronchitis
- Neuromuscular disorders, such as Myasthenia Gravis, Guillain-Barre syndrome, Motor Neurone Disease

Assessment

Does the patient seem distressed?

Are they restless or frowning?

(See Restlessness & Agitation pamphlet)

Family members may be anxious and distressed by the noisy breathing.

Management

1. If the patient can tolerate it and it is safe to do so, turn the patient onto one side. Or you can raise the head of the bed or prop the patient up with pillows.
2. Noisy breathing sounds worse if it is the only sound in the room. Create a distraction by playing some music, turning on the television, encouraging the family to chat and remember happier times.
3. Aromatherapy - use essential oils in an aroma burner or vaporiser. Suitable oils include eucalyptus, lavender, lemon, lime, cypress, marjoram, cedarwood.
4. Give the patient regular mouth and lip care. Wipe away any dribbling with tissues. Use mouth swabs to wipe any loose secretions gently out of the mouth.
5. Suctioning may cause more distress for the dying person. This is only appropriate if there is a large amount of fluid in the mouth or running out the mouth.
6. Remove excess moisture from all moist swabs for mouth care before you put them in the patient's mouth.