

Understanding Palliative Care



For most Americans, palliative care is a foreign concept. The word palliative itself can be unfamiliar and even intimidating. But once they get to know the care and how it can help themselves or their loved ones more comfortably live with a serious illness, palliative care can become one of the most important elements of their care plan.

Simply put, palliative care is the collection of medical services, medications, and support that improve the mental and physical experience of those living with a serious illness. With effective palliative care, people achieve a better quality of life with less pain and fewer troubling challenges related to their health.

Morgan McCall, director of palliative care at Intrepid USA Healthcare Services, said this type of care provides a huge benefit and can dramatically improve people's lives. The problem, she said, is that people often don't know about the care or are confused about what it is.

According to a recent study by the Center to Advance Palliative Care¹, about 40% of Americans didn't know enough about palliative care to have an opinion about it. However, after they learned about it, a majority of people had a favorable attitude about it.

"It's really powerful that a simple definition of palliative care would increase the likelihood of someone accepting that care," McCall said. "It's our job to educate and advocate, and sometimes even healthcare provider knowledge about it is limited."

Who Can Benefit From Palliative Care?

Anyone living with a serious illness can benefit

from palliative care. Serious illnesses are those that are chronic or progressive, like cancer, heart disease, kidney disease, lung disease, and Alzheimer's Disease.

Fortunately, people don't have to wait until their symptoms are severe to begin receiving help. This type of care can be offered at any stage of a serious illness, so it's important to begin having conversations about it early. Doing so can prevent pain, stress, and other symptoms from seemingly taking over a person's life.

Palliative care is often confused with hospice care, but unlike hospice care, people can receive its specialty services while also receiving treatment that is meant to cure their condition.

"Palliative care should begin at the time of diagnosis with any serious illness and walk that journey with a person and their family to improve months or even years of suffering and promote timely hospice referral when that's appropriate," McCall said.

Visit [GetPalliativeCare](#) for a quick quiz to learn if palliative care might be appropriate for you or your loved one. Answering yes to any of the questions means you would probably benefit from a meaningful conversation about palliative care and how it can help your specific situation.

How Can I Start Getting Palliative Care?

Your doctor should be familiar with palliative care and how it can help, so this is often a good place to start. You also can call an in-home healthcare provider to learn more about the services and how they can benefit you or a loved one.

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Specialized palliative care services can be delivered anywhere you call home and are covered by Medicare, Medicaid, and most private insurance plans.

How Does Palliative Care Work?

Once you decide that you would like to receive palliative care to help you achieve a better quality of life, a team of specially trained experts will get to work. These nurses and therapists will work with your physician and your other care team members to help you live with as few burdensome symptoms and anxieties as possible.

“Number one, we make sure they understand their disease process where they are and what they might expect as the disease progresses, then we fill in any gaps,” McCall said. “Then we move into their goals as they think about their future with their health, and we start talking about their comfort level.”

Those who have burdensome symptoms like pain, trouble breathing, or lack of appetite then can start learning how these symptoms can be better managed together with their palliative care team.

“Ultimately, this is going to help them have better days, and that’s one of the most important things,” McCall said. “We will ensure our care plan aligns with their goals, values, and priorities and that we are making clinical recommendations that align with those as well.”

So, Palliative Care Really Isn’t the Same as Hospice?

Although palliative care provides enormous relief to thousands of people, it’s still misunderstood,

and because it’s often confused with hospice, it can be a frightening concept.

“Awareness of palliative care has grown substantially in the past 10 years, but it’s still very low,” McCall said. “Physicians don’t typically refer or discuss it as often as they should.”

People living with a serious illness should understand that while palliative care is an important element of hospice care, the two are not the same. Palliative care is simply focused on making it easier and more comfortable to live with a condition. Those who choose palliative care receive supportive, compassionate care that makes it easier to do the things they love and easier to receive the necessary treatments for their condition.

Palliative Care Makes It Easier To Be You

The role of palliative care is never to take over the person’s care but is instead meant to be an extra layer of support. Palliative care helps a person navigate what can be a very difficult time in their life.

“Palliative care is about a holistic, whole-person, whole-body approach,” McCall said. “We’re here to help people living with a serious illness understand their condition and their choices for care, and ultimately lead more comfortable lives in line with their personal needs and priorities.”

¹ Center to Advance Palliative Care (CAPC), *Palliative Care Research*, Elizabeth Harrington, Partner, 2019.