

Palliative Care Tip – Issue#19:

MANAGEMENT OF NOISY RESPIRATORY SECRETIONS IN THE FINAL HOURS TO DAYS OF LIFE / June 2018

Significance: “Noisy Respiratory Secretions (death rattle)” is a common occurrence in the final hours-days of life (12-92% patients) (1).

Causes: It is caused by turbulent airflow over retained oropharyngeal and bronchial secretions.

Management:

1. Family members and alternative decision makers are often distressed by patient’s respiratory secretions while patients generally are unaware due to their levels of consciousness.
2. **Key intervention:** To reassure that this does not affect patients’ respiratory distress and support the family before considering pharmacological intervention. Providing anticipatory guidance helps families and caregivers normalize this symptom.
3. **Nonpharmacological approach:** Positioning to avoid aspiration and suctioning oropharyngeal secretions.
4. **Pharmacological approach:** Anticholinergic agents reduce both saliva and mucus production but are unable to reduce the secretions already formed in the airway. No pharmacological treatment has been found superior to placebo (2).
5. **No evidence:** in withholding of hydration or administration of diuretics reduces secretions (3).

Pharmacotherapy when Key Intervention and Nonpharmacological approach insufficient:

1. Hyoscine hydrobromide (Scopolamine) is commonly used (0.3-0.6 mg subcut q4h ATC and/or prn); however, this drug should be avoided in conscious patients as it may cause anticholinergic associated delirium and/or sedation.
2. Hyoscine butylbromide (Buscopan) (10-20 mg subcut q4-6h prn) may be used.
3. Glycopyrrolate (0.2-0.4 mg subcut ATC and/or prn) is an alternative that is less likely to cause CNS side effects.
4. Atropine (0.4-0.8 mg subcut q4h ATC and/or prn or 1 mg sublingual = two drops of 1% solution q1h prn)
5. Ensure gentle and attentive mouth care regularly to provide comfort

References

1. Lokker ME, van Zuylen L, van der Rijt CC, van der Heide A. Prevalence, impact, and treatment of death rattle: a systematic review. *J Pain Symptom Manage.* 2014;47(1):105–122.
2. Jansen K, Haugen DF, Pont L, Ruths S. Safety and Effectiveness of Palliative Drug Treatment in the Last Days of Life Systematic Review. *J Pain Symptom Manage.* 2018;55(2):508-521.
3. Fritzson A, Tavelin B, Axelsson B. Association between parenteral fluids and symptoms in hospital end-of-life care: an observational study of 280 patients. *BMJ Support Palliat Care.* 2015;5(2):160-8.