

END OF LIFE CARE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A Guide for Patients and their Families

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In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate

Abundant Peace, Blessings and Salutations upon the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ

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Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic may possibly overwhelm Canada's healthcare system. Unfortunately, it may also leave many patients and their families in situations that will require critical and difficult treatment decisions. This document will help Muslims emotionally and spiritually prepare to make informed decisions for end-of-life care.

General Care Considerations

- If a patient's condition becomes life threatening, they will need to decide the level of care that they wish to receive.
- Depending on the wishes of the patient, they may choose to either focus on remaining comfortable during this end stage of life, or may be assessed for medical suitability for intensive care.
 - **Intensive Care**
 - Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) if their heart stops or if they stop breathing on their own.
 - CPR is an emergency attempt to restore heart and lung function with vigorous chest compressions to pump the heart and manual or machine-supported breathing.
 - CPR may not be successful in patients who are severely or terminally ill, are older or have multiple medical conditions.
 - In such cases, it is appropriate for a patient to forgo these more aggressive treatments, in which case a Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) order may be requested
 - CPR and mechanical ventilation are examples of what is seen in Intensive Care, where patients with life-threatening medical conditions are under continuous observation and are treated with medications and equipment to maintain essential bodily functions, with the primary goal of recovery.
 - These patients are often admitted to an Intensive Care Unit (ICU).
 - **Palliative Care**
 - This focuses on easing and preventing suffering and improving the quality of remaining life, while allowing nature to take its course as one expects to pass away from their illness.
 - These patients may be able to receive this care at home or at the hospital.

COVID-19 Care Considerations

- Most individuals with COVID-19 will recover without the need for a ventilator at all. Some may require supplemental oxygen.
- However, some who are diagnosed with COVID-19 may develop significant difficulty breathing that may not respond to oxygen given through a face mask, and a decision would need to be made on whether or not to provide intensive care by means of a ventilator to help them breathe.
- Some of those placed on ventilators may go on to recover from their illness, while many others may pass away if their body is unable to recover.

- Those that recover from such critical illness where they've had to be on a ventilator, may have complete or only partial recovery, and may suffer from various complications including but not limited to organ failure, infections, blood clots, skin ulcers, weakness, confusion or mental health issues, and side effects or complications from medications or procedures. Depending on their duration and severity of illness, they may also require rehabilitation following discharge from an acute care hospital.
- Those that choose not to have a breathing tube, CPR, or other similar aggressive or invasive measures, but would still like to have active medical treatment such as with medications, antibiotics, fluids etc., will still continue to receive these interventions.
 - If their condition deteriorates, the focus would be on managing symptoms such as shortness of breath with an understanding that they may pass away from this condition.
- The medical team will also be making a determination as to whether a breathing tube and ventilator would be considered medically suitable for someone based on their medical condition and likelihood of meaningful recovery.

COVID-19 End of Life Care Considerations

- If it seems that a patient is deteriorating and unlikely to survive, the medical team will speak to the substitute decision maker about changing the focus of care towards comfort measures, or palliative care.
 - This means focusing on the quality of life of the patient for the remainder of their time and accepting that their body has entered the dying process (which can be highly variable in duration).
- Palliative care neither hastens nor postpones death. It provides relief from pain, shortness of breath and other distressing symptoms.
- Some patients and families wonder whether Islam allows palliative care.
 - Muslim scholars agree that if the medical team has determined the patient's condition to be terminal then it is permissible to focus on comfort which includes relieving pain and suffering.
- At times, a family may have to decide if a ventilator is to be withdrawn, if the treatment proves to be futile and unlikely to be of benefit to the patient.
 - Some Islamic schools of thought do not allow withdrawal of life support including ventilators once initiated.
 - It is important to discuss this with the medical team before the patient is put on a ventilator, to determine whether it provides the patient a significant chance of recovery.
- Though some may have wishes to pass away at home, in the case of a COVID-19 infection, it may not be possible due to the infectious nature of the disease and the risk it would pose to others around the patient.
- Patients should try to ensure they have their financial arrangements including legal wills, estate planning and funeral arrangements made in advance if possible, to allow adequate time for thinking and planning, to avoid high costs of last minute requests and to prevent placing an extra burden on grieving family members.



- The medical team, which includes a social worker, will be sensitive to the spiritual needs of patients admitted to hospital; please communicate these needs and wishes to them.
- Patients may request the hospital Muslim chaplain to provide spiritual guidance and support.

Patient Care Decision-Making

- Islamically, patients have significant autonomy in their care.
 - Treatment is only considered mandatory if there is a very high probability that the treatment will save the patient's life.
 - Withdrawal of life saving treatment is considered permissible if treatment is considered futile or there is a natural trajectory to death.
 - It is permissible to decline intensive treatments, like ventilation, if benefit is questionable, since seeking this treatment is not mandatory
- It is extremely important for everyone to **discuss their end-of-life care wishes with their family while they are well** and to communicate these wishes to the treating medical team.
- If the patient is unable to express their wishes to medical staff at the time that a decision needs to be made, a valid Advance Health Directive (AHD) will be followed if available, or alternatively the Power of Attorney for personal care (POAPC) or the next available substitute decision-maker (SDM) will be contacted to make a decision.
 - This decision is usually made upon admission to hospital and the preference is not to wait and see if someone deteriorates to decide what the next steps would be, as it could happen at any time and without advance notice.
- Substitute decision makers are asked to make decisions based on what they believe the patient would want, based on their previously expressed wishes.
- There is an established hierarchy of substitute decision makers, and it proceeds as follows with decreasing order of authority:
 1. Court appointed guardian
 2. Attorney for personal care
 3. Representative appointed by the Consent and Capacity Board
 4. Spouse or partner
 5. Parents or children
 6. Parent with right of access only
 7. Siblings
 8. Any other relative
 9. Public Guardian and Trustee (PG&T)

Unique Challenges in a Pandemic

- During pandemics, where infections are widespread across the world, physicians and ethicists may be forced to make difficult decisions about who can receive intensive, life-saving medical care measures when medications, medical devices, healthcare workers and hospital beds are in limited supply.

- Unfortunately, this may result in some patients not receiving the intensive, possibly life-saving medical care that suits their wishes, given the scarcity of resources.
- In the case of scarcity of medical resources, a ventilator should not be removed from some people for the benefit of others without proper justification.
 - An example of a reasonable justification would be when the treatment is proven to be futile for one person but potentially very beneficial for another person.
- When there is no scarcity of medical resources, life support should not be removed by the medical team unless it becomes clinically futile and the resumption of a stable life is not expected.
 - The patient and/or their guardian may choose to end life support if the probable harms outweigh benefits or if dignified life is not expected.
- Islamically, it is permissible for some people to favor others over themselves with that which is not necessary for their own survival.
 - With good intentions these altruistic acts can be rewarded.
- Patients may be significantly restricted in their end-of-life care choices when resources are scarce.
 - Those that may prefer to pass away at home may not be able to do so if they are contagious.
 - Those who may want care in a private room or particular hospital department may not have those options available to them.
- Patients may also be limited from physical interactions or isolated at their time of death.
 - Family members or friends who are under quarantine for COVID-19 will not be permitted to attend to anyone in hospital as this may spread the virus and cause others to get sick.
 - There may also be significant restrictions on having any visitors in the hospital, regardless of their health status, depending on local hospital policies.
 - Under these circumstances, patients can use electronic communication devices, like a phone or tablet to have video calls with loved ones.
 - Doctors may be limited in the time they are able to spend with their patients.

Religious Rites at the Time of Death

- **Before the time of the death**, one should:
 - Seek forgiveness from anyone that they may have wronged, intentionally or unintentionally.
 - Arrange to repay any outstanding debts.
 - The person who is dying should maintain positivity, and hope for the mercy and forgiveness of Allah.
- **Near the time of death:**
 - In the last moments of life, the closest family around the patient should gently say the kalimah (declaration of faith) with the dying person in a very gentle manner, so that they may also recite it before death.
 - Recite: لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَّسُولُ اللَّهِ | 'lā ilāha illā -llāh, muḥammadur rasūlu -llāh
 - Translation: There is no one worthy of being worshipped except Allah and Muhammad ﷺ is His final messenger.
 - Or: لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ | 'lā ilāha illā -llāh
 - Translation: There is no one worthy of being worshipped except Allah

- If possible, turn the person on his or her right side, towards the Qiblah.
 - If not possible, try to move the bed so that the patient is facing the Qiblah.
- Read the Quran, particularly Surah Yaseen while the soul is departing.
- **After the patient has passed away:**
 - Close the patient's eyelids and ensure that their body is adequately covered.
 - Recite prayers for forgiveness.
 - Recite: **إِنَّا لِلّٰهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ** | Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un
 - Translation: To Allah we belong and to Him we return.

Death During the COVID-19 Pandemic

- In the case of a patient who dies during the pandemic or from COVID-19 itself, these usual ghusl, kaffan and janazah rights may be altered to prevent spread of the disease as the deceased may still be contagious at the time of death.
- Salat ul-Janazah (funeral prayer) should not be delayed; it may be performed at the graveside even after the burial, with the fewest number of congregants keeping a minimum 6 ft apart.
 - This prayer may be privately live streamed to the deceased's close family members, if arranged.
 - Though difficult, it is important that those in quarantine or recovering from illness not participate in the janazah, even if they are close to the deceased.
 - It is important to follow all public health and government recommendations regarding gatherings and distancing at all times.
- Give Sadaqah (voluntary charity) for the deceased.
- Loved ones should **not** visit the family of the deceased during a pandemic, and instead offer condolences by phone or by electronic modes of communication.

Dua for the Deceased

اللَّهُمَّ اغْفِرْ لَهُ وَارْحَمْهُ ، وَعَافِهِ وَاعْفُ عَنْهُ ، وَأَكْرِمْ نُزُلَهُ ، وَوَسِّعْ مَدْخَلَهُ ، وَاعْسِلْهُ بِالْمَاءِ وَالتَّلَجِ وَالتَّبَرَّدِ ، وَنَقِّهِ مِنَ الْخَطَايَا كَمَا نَقَّيْتَ الثُّوْبَ الْأَبْيَضَ مِنَ الدَّنَسِ ، وَأَبْدِلْهُ دَارًا خَيْرًا مِنْ دَارِهِ ، وَأَهْلًا خَيْرًا مِنْ أَهْلِهِ ، وَزَوْجًا خَيْرًا مِنْ زَوْجِهِ ، وَأَدْخِلْهُ الْجَنَّةَ ، وَأَعِذْهُ مِنْ عَذَابِ الْقَبْرِ وَعَذَابِ النَّارِ

اللَّهُمَّ اغْفِرْ لِحَيَاتِنَا وَمَيِّتِنَا وَشَاهِدِنَا ، وَغَائِبِنَا ، وَصَغِيرِنَا وَكَبِيرِنَا ، وَذَكَرِنَا وَأُنْثَانَا. اللَّهُمَّ مَنْ أَحْيَيْتَهُ مِنَّا فَأَحْيِهِ عَلَى الْإِسْلَامِ ، وَمَنْ تَوَفَّيْتَهُ مِنَّا فَتَوَفَّهُ عَلَى الْإِيمَانِ ، اللَّهُمَّ لَا تَحْرِمْنَا أَجْرَهُ ، وَلَا تُضِلَّنَا بَعْدَهُ

اللَّهُمَّ إِنَّ فُلَانًا بَنَ فُلَانٍ فِي ذِمَّتِكَ ، وَحَبْلٍ جَوَارِكَ ، فَقِهِ مِنْ فِتْنَةِ الْقَبْرِ وَعَذَابِ النَّارِ ، وَأَنْتَ أَهْلُ الْوَفَاءِ وَالْحَقِّ ، فَاعْفُ لَهُ وَارْحَمْهُ ، إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ

O Allah, forgive him and have mercy on him and give him strength and pardon him. Be generous to him and cause his entrance to be wide and wash him with water and snow and hail. Cleanse him of his transgressions as white cloth is cleansed of stains. Give him an abode better than his home, and a family better than his family and a wife better than his wife. Take him into Paradise and protect him from the punishment of the grave [and from the punishment of Hell-fire].



O Allah forgive our living and our dead, those who are with us and those who are absent, our young and our old, our menfolk and our womenfolk. O Allah, whomever you give life from among us give him life in Islam, and whomever you take away from us take him away in Faith. O Allah, do not forbid us their reward and do not send us astray after them.

O Allah, surely [name the person] is under Your protection, and in the rope of Your security, so save him from the trial of the grave and from the punishment of the Fire. You fulfil promises and grant rights, so forgive him and have mercy on him. Surely You are Most Forgiving, Most Merciful.

Hadith

- Narrated Anas bin Malik: Allah's Apostle said, "(Death from) plague is martyrdom for every Muslim." (Sahih Bukhari 7:71,628)
- Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "He (a Muslim) who dies of an abdominal disease is a martyr, and he who dies of plague is a martyr." (Sahih Bukhari 7:71,629)
- Narrated Aisha: that "I asked the Messenger of God ﷺ about pandemics. The Messenger of God ﷺ told me that it used to be a punishment that God would send unto whomever He wills. Then He made it a mercy for believers. There is not a person who encounters a pandemic that 1) resides in his or her home patiently; 2) in anticipation; 3) while realizing that nothing afflicts him or her besides what God has decreed, except that he or she has a reward similar to that of a martyr." (Sahih Bukhari 1:3,474)
- How amazing is the affair of the believer; his entire affair is good for him. And no one except the believer has this. If ease befalls him, he expresses gratitude, and that is good for him. And if adversity befalls him, he endures it patiently and that is good for him." (Sahih Muslim 2999)

Quranic Verses

- Wherever you may be, death will overcome you—even if you were in fortified towers." When something good befalls them, they say, "This is from Allah," but when something evil befalls them, they say, "This is from you." Say, 'O Prophet,' "Both have been destined by Allah." So what is the matter with these people? They can hardly comprehend anything! (Surah An-Nisa [4:78])
- "My Lord! Grant me wisdom, and join me with the righteous. Bless me with honourable mention among later generations. Make me one of those awarded the Garden of Bliss." (Surah Ash-Shu'ara [26:83-85])
- O believers! Seek comfort in patience and prayer. Allah is truly with those who are patient. Never say that those martyred in the cause of Allah are dead—in fact, they are alive! But you do not perceive it. We will certainly test you with a touch of fear and famine and loss of property, life, and crops. Give good news to those who patiently endure — who, when faced with a disaster, say, "Surely to Allah we belong and to Him we will 'all' return." They are the ones who will receive Allah's blessings and mercy. And it is they who are 'rightly' guided. (Surah Al-Baqara [2:152-157])