Your Choices at the End of Life
Understanding Your Options for Comfort and Control

When someone is very sick and may not get better, it's important to know what choices they have for care and comfort. Everyone deserves to feel safe, cared for, and in control at the end of life. This handout explains four common options.

1. **Palliative Care**
   Focus: Comfort during serious illness (at any stage)

Palliative care helps people feel better when they have a serious illness. It focuses on relieving pain, stress, and other symptoms. You can get palliative care at the same time as treatment for your illness. A team of doctors, nurses, social workers, and chaplains can help support you and your loved ones. Typically, a person sees the palliative care team at their office or through virtual telehealth visits.

2. **Hospice Care**
   Focus: Comfort near the end of life

Hospice care is for people who are likely in the last 6 months of life. It helps people live as fully and comfortably as possible. Hospice does not try to cure the illness, but focuses on pain relief, support, and dignity. Care usually happens at home, but could also happen in a facility, or in a hospital. The hospice team supports both the patient and their loved ones.

3. **Medical Aid in Dying (MAID)**
   Focus: Choosing when and how to die

In some states (like Washington), adults with a terminal illness can ask a medical provider for medicine to help them die at the time of their choosing, if they meet certain rules. This is called Medical Aid in Dying or using the Death with Dignity law. It is only for people who are very sick, expecting to die soon, and can make their own decisions. The person must take the medicine themselves.

4. **Voluntarily Stopping Eating and Drinking (VSED)**
   Focus: Natural way to end life when ready

Some people choose to stop eating and drinking when they feel their life is complete. This is called VSED. It is a legal option for those who have the ability to make informed medical decisions. The person slowly weakens and dies over several days to weeks (on average it takes about 2 weeks). Hospice can provide comfort care to help manage thirst, pain, and other symptoms.

You're Not Alone

These choices are deeply personal. Talk with your loved ones, medical providers, and care teams to find what's right for you. No matter what you choose, there are people who will support you with care, kindness, and respect.

This handout is for information only. Talk with your healthcare provider to learn more about what options are right for you.

End of Life Washington (EOLWA) upholds your right to the full range of end of life choices, including Death with Dignity, through advocacy, education, and support. www.endoflifewa.org | 206-256-1636

Updated August 2025