Hospice Versus Palliative Care: Is There a Difference?

Palliative care offers symptom relief for people with serious illness, whether life-threatening or curable, early-stage or advanced.

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The month of November is designated as National Hospice and Palliative Care Month. While the terms are often used interchangeably, it is important for patients and their caregivers to understand the difference and realize the value of these services in the care journey.

Palliative care is offered to those suffering from serious illnesses such as cancer, stroke, or heart failure, with a focus on providing relief from the symptoms and stress because of the illness. Palliative support can be integrated into the care plan of both life-threatening as well as curable conditions and can be offered during active treatment. It is supportive care that can be offered to young and old patients, early-stage and advanced-stage patients.

Hospice is specialized palliative care for people who are at the end of their life who may have less than 6 months of life expectancy. Hospice is focused on patient care and comfort while maintaining a decent quality of life close to the end. It is designed for when a serious health condition is not curable or when a patient chooses to not undergo certain treatments. The hospice care team does not attempt to slow disease progression. Rather, the sole focus is to manage symptoms so that the person's last days are spent with dignity. Hospice care can be provided at home, in a hospital, or at an extended-care facility.

Patient Perceptions of Hospice and Palliative Care

A 2014 study published in *British Medical Journal*, which looked at 594 text responses of patients documenting their experience with palliative care, found that the emotional experience of care was the most significant and the most important to patients. A majority of patients said the emotional care they received for themselves and their families allowed them to cope with the newfound challenges with their illness. Another study that evaluated patient perceptions of palliative care quality in hospice inpatient care, daycare, and nursing homes found that "honesty", "atmosphere", and "respect and empathy" were the most important aspects of hospice care that they appreciated.

Insurance Coverage for Hospice and Palliative Care

Whether insurance covers hospice and palliative care, or how much is covered, depends on the insurance plan. Most insurance plans cover palliative care, but coverage may vary. It's best to speak with your insurance plan for details.

Most private insurance plans cover hospice care. Medicare and Medicaid provide complete coverage for hospice services. Medicare-certified hospice care is usually provided at home. Details on Medicare-covered hospice care can be found here and Medicaid coverage information is available here.

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