



The Medicare Hospice Benefit

What does it mean for you and your patients?

Who is eligible for the Medicare hospice benefit?

Patients are eligible if they have Medicare Part A, have opted for comfort-focused palliative care, and have been certified by a physician as having a life expectancy of 6 months or less if the underlying disease runs its normal course. Patients can be recertified for hospice care if they continue to meet eligibility guidelines.

What does the Medicare benefit cover?

Medicare Part A covers up to 100% of the cost of hospice care related to a hospice-eligible patient's hospice diagnosis. For patients with Medicare Advantage, hospice is covered by original Medicare.* Patients with a private or employer-provided health plan should check with their insurance provider for details about hospice eligibility, coverage, and out-of-pocket expenses. Medicaid coverage varies by state; beneficiaries should check with their state's Medicaid agency and/or hospice association for specifics.

How is hospice care defined?

Medicare mandates that all hospices provide 4 levels of care:

- **Routine home care**, provided wherever the patient resides (private residence, nursing home, assisted living facility)
- **Continuous home care** (called Intensive Comfort Care® at VITAS), marked by temporary shifts of home nursing care up to 24 hours at the bedside, when medically necessary to manage acute symptoms
- **Inpatient hospice care**, provided in a freestanding inpatient unit or a contract bed in a hospital or nursing facility for patients whose serious symptoms and pain cannot be managed at home
- **Respite care**, up to 5 consecutive days for a patient in an inpatient setting to relieve caregiver stress for a short period

*A small number of Medicare Advantage organizations are testing the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' Value-Based Insurance Design (VBID) model and its hospice benefit component. Patients should check with their Medicare Advantage plan provider.

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What is an interdisciplinary hospice team?

VITAS addresses the physical, spiritual, and psychosocial needs of patients and families. The VITAS interdisciplinary team includes a physician, nurse, aide, chaplain, social worker, and volunteer. A bereavement specialist is available for support for a minimum of 13 months after a death.

VITAS offers an expanded care team to better support our patients and families, including respiratory therapy, dietary support, PT/OT/speech therapy, music therapy, pet visits, and massage.*

What is the role of attending or primary physicians?

A patient's primary physician can remain the attending physician during hospice care, or the VITAS hospice physician can assume the role of the attending. Specialists and primary care physicians can remain as involved as they wish in a patient's hospice plan of care.

How does Medicare reimburse hospice providers?

Medicare's per-diem rate covers all professional services, ancillary supplies, and equipment related to the patient's hospice diagnosis, level of care, and location.

How can a clinician explore or start hospice care with VITAS?

Once a patient's advanced illness meets hospice eligibility guidelines, physicians should initiate a goals-of-care conversation with the patient/family to uncover their preferences, wishes, and values. A VITAS clinician can also facilitate this conversation. Research shows that a hospice referral as soon as a patient is eligible increases patient involvement in care plans and advance directives, eases pain/symptoms sooner, avoids unnecessary care and hospitalizations, and increases the likelihood that patients' care wishes and goals will be honored. Patients can revoke hospice services at any time, and they can return to hospice care if they meet eligibility guidelines.

What is the most important factor to understand about hospice care?

Hospice is a proven solution for current healthcare challenges. Hospice addresses the needs of patients with advanced illness, delivers high-quality care, improves patient/family satisfaction, and lowers the costs of care. VITAS specialists are available 24/7/365 to provide compassionate care to patients and their families in the final months of life.

*Individual integrative services may not be available in all programs.

Questions? Contact your VITAS representative for more information.



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