

Common Questions about the End-of-Life Choice VSED



What is VSED?

VSED stands for Voluntary Stopping Eating & Dinking. At the end of their lives, many people lose their appetites and stop eating as their body's organs shut down. Some people deliberately choose to stop eating and drinking in order to hasten their death.

Who is most likely to use VSED?

It is important for most people to maintain a sense of purpose and control for themselves. This gives meaning and purpose to their lives. Preserving that sense of autonomy often includes choosing how to die. People with certain diseases, especially neurological diseases, often do not qualify for Washington State's Death with Dignity Law. Because of their suffering, their option to die by VSED is significant. It may be the only option for them to express this sense of autonomy.

*Washington State's Death with Dignity law requires that a person be mentally competent to make the decision to end their life and to have received a terminal diagnosis with a six-month prognosis. People with advanced dementia or with a diagnosis where it is difficult to predict a six-month prognosis therefore do not qualify for DWD. However, if a person in early stages of dementia chooses to end their life using VSED, they can legally do so.

What are the requirements?

It is important that this be a well-considered choice. Talk with a healthcare provider about your options. Have a conversation with your family about your decision so that you have the support you need. Identify caregivers who are not family; this allows family members to be emotional supports rather than medical caregivers. Be sure to get your legal and financial work in order, and read up on what happens during the VSED process. Having a clear understanding of what to expect is critical in maintaining the determination to precede, given that completing VSED results in the end of your life.

If I want to VSED, what needs to be done first?

1. Talk with a medical provider about your interest or decision and ask if they can help you with VSED; if not, ask them to refer you to someone who can
2. Get your legal and financial affairs in order
3. Talk with family members about your decision; determine if they can help with caregiving
4. Make plans for what will happen to your body after death

Legal and Practical Considerations

Is VSED legal?

Yes! Patients have the right to refuse care, including food and hydration. However, it is helpful to consult an attorney who can help you organize your legal and financial affairs before you begin.

What is the cost for VSED?

- **Medication:** Cost of palliative care medications is minimal. On average, people who VSED can expect to spend less than \$100 on pain relievers, anti-anxiety medication, and other palliative care medications.
- **Medical supplies:** If you decide to VSED at home, you will need to rent a hospital bed and bedside commode. You may also need to purchase a humidifier and other supplies, like lotion, mouth care items, and lip balm. Again, these costs vary.
- **Hired caregivers:** The out-of-pocket cost of caregivers who are experienced with death care varies depending on how many hours per day they are needed and how long the VSED process takes. Average costs can range anywhere from several hundred dollars to a few thousand dollars. Proper medical support is essential for VSED. Hired caregivers provide nursing care, give medications as necessary, and release family members from caregiving responsibilities. VSED can take anywhere from several days to several weeks, and it's important for family members to eat regularly and get adequate sleep during this time.
- **End-of-Life Doulas:** Death doulas help families coordinate with caregivers, hospice, outside healthcare providers, and community services. They increase the family's knowledge of the dying process and promote a calm environment by helping decrease stress and conflict. Costs associated with hiring an End-of-Life Doula vary by region and practitioner.
- **Hospice:** If you qualify for Hospice Care, costs for some medical items are at least partially covered by Medicare. However, hourly or daily caregiver expenses are not covered by hospice.

Is VSED covered by medical insurance?

Not typically. Medication is covered if you have Medicare or pharmacy coverage. Caregiving, however, is not unless you have Long-Term Care insurance.

Does dying by VSED affect life insurance payments?

No. Voluntarily stopping eating and drinking is not considered suicide.

What is listed as cause of death on the death certificate?

The underlying disease process is listed as the cause of death.

Who will be Involved?

Who helps me through this VSED process?

It is important to become knowledgeable about the VSED process by speaking with your medical care provider, an End-Of-Life Doula (death doula), and possibly a caregiver or other person who has witnessed someone dying via VSED.

An End-of-Life Doula serves as a compassionate planner or case manager. The death doula helps the whole family understand what will happen, helps family members determine how they can be supportive, coordinates schedules and caregiving responsibilities, communicates with healthcare provider and hospice, helps the person and family anticipate the daily changes, and coordinates after-death plans.

Will my doctor help me VSED?

Some doctors and physician assistants can medically manage VSED if they choose. Providers associated with Catholic hospitals are sometimes prohibited from doing so. It is important to speak with your own healthcare provider. If they cannot assist you, ask to be referred to someone who can help. You may also consult VSEDresources.com, the website for VSED Resources Northwest, for assistance in finding a healthcare provider who is experienced with VSED.

Can I stay at home or do I need to go elsewhere?

VSED can take place at home, which is where most people prefer to be at the end of their lives. Other arrangements can also be made.

Do my family members need to agree with my decision?

No, but it is helpful if family members are supportive. It is important to have a “courageous conversation” with family to tell them of your decision to VSED. Family or friends can be with you during the VSED process if they are supportive of your choice.

Is VSED part of hospice care?

VSED often is part of hospice care, especially if the person is at home. Some hospice care facilities do not allow their residents to use VSED on site.

Federal regulations mandate that people have a diagnosis of six months or less to live in order to qualify for hospice. While some people who choose to use VSED have that diagnosis, others do not. Some hospice providers now consider a person eligible for hospice care BECAUSE they intend to VSED, which means they have fewer than six months to live.

It is important to check with your hospice provider ahead of time about whether you qualify for services. If a person does not qualify for hospice prior to starting VSED, they can sometimes qualify once they have started the process or are unconscious. A death doula can be helpful in sorting out whether a resident of a care facility can do VSED.

If I live at home and qualify for hospice, does hospice replace the caregivers I have hired for VSED?

No. Hospice offers access to a social worker, visiting nurse, bath aide, chaplain, and other palliative care services, but they do not provide daily or hourly caregivers.

What is Involved in the VSED Process?

How long does it take?

Typically, VSED takes around 10 days, but it can take shorter or longer depending on the health status of the person doing VSED. If there is a disease process involved, it can take only a few days, while for those who are not terminally ill, the time to death is often 10 days or longer.

What steps are involved?

The VSED preparation process starts with an initial clearing of the gut, similar to the preparation for a colonoscopy. Clearing the intestines and colon of food helps prevent constipation and abdominal pain later. After this cleanse, no food or water is ingested. Caregivers give careful attention thereafter to assess for comfort, safety, and physical and emotional support. Bodies can live without food but not without water. If neither food nor water is ingested, the body's organ systems begin to shut down within the first week, and the person enters a coma a few days before death.

What medications are involved in the VSED process?

Healthcare providers can write prescriptions for liquid morphine and lorazepam, medications that can lower anxiety and help ease difficulty in breathing—two common symptoms people experience as their body organs shut down during the VSED process. For those with dementia, haloperidol may treat delirium, agitation, and severe sundowning associated with physical and cognitive decline during VSED.

What does the VSED process feel like?

VSED is not associated with any unique end-of-life symptoms. Pain, dry mouth, thirst, shortness of breath, and agitation are commonly reported, but hunger is not a common symptom.

Symptom management is the same as with other dying patients:

- Feelings of thirst are lessened with careful mouth care, i.e. brushed teeth, lip balm, spritzing with fine mist, cool cloths to the face
- Dry mouth and throat are helped with using a cool air humidifier in the room
- Dry skin soothed with lotion and cool, wet cloths
- Shortness of breath and anxiety are lessened with liquid morphine and lorazepam.

During the initial few days of the process, an individual can interact almost normally with family members, and may take pleasure in hearing family stories, listening to favorite music, or being read to. This is a precious, sacred time for doing the work of dying: saying goodbye, being forgiven and forgiving, and expressing love.

Where can I find out More?

The [Reading List page](#) on our website contains additional resources, from books and videos to articles and podcasts. You may also call us at (360) 919-6363 or email us at info@VSEDresources.com to set up a free consultation.