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Food & fluids at the end of life

When people are near the end of life, it is natural for them to slow down or stop eating and drinking.



Do people who are dying experience hunger and thirst?

Yes they can, however they won't have the same appetite or need for food and fluids like they used to. As the body continues to weaken and shut down, it no longer requires the nutritional intake, and it can actually become a burden on the body to try to process food and fluids.

If the mouth and lips are kept moist, patients can feel more hydrated and comfortable.

What can families do to make the patient comfortable?

While your loved one can still eat and swallow safely, offering easy-to-swallow foods such as ice cream, apple sauce and pudding can be refreshing and pleasurable.

Your healthcare team may recommend a swallowing assessment to determine whether your loved one can consume food safely and without difficulty.

Staff can advise you on how to give your loved one small amounts of food and fluid.

Family members can learn how to provide mouth care for their loved one by asking the nurse. The mouth can be cleansed with mouthwash, moisture spray can be made available for a dry mouth and petroleum jelly can be applied to the lips regularly.

What about giving fluids through a needle?

Fluids containing sugar and salt can be given by an intravenous or butterfly needle. While this is not necessary at the end of life, there may be specific reasons for doing so. If applicable, your healthcare team may wish to discuss this option with you. It is important to note that providing fluids by needle can cause discomfort by accumulating in the body including the lungs.

What about feeding tubes?

Feeding tubes are a vehicle for nourishment into the stomach either through the nose or into the abdominal wall when swallowing is absent. When the goal of care is to prolong life and gain strength, a feeding tube may help.

However, feeding tubes can cause complications like infection and aspiration, and may be somewhat uncomfortable for your loved one. Feeding tubes are not typically used in palliative patients nearing the end of life, and in those settings may not necessarily prolong life.

If you have questions about feeding tubes, talk to your healthcare team.

How do I decide about intravenous or feeding tubes?

If your loved one cannot communicate their wishes, these decisions can be difficult, confusing and painful to make. It can be helpful to speak with your healthcare team as well as consider the following:

- Any previously expressed wishes or conversations with your loved one about end of life care
- The aim of comfort for your loved one
- What will provide the best quality of life?
- The benefit versus burden of these artificial supports

How else can I comfort my loved ones?

- Touch can provide reassurance, calm and connection. Consider holding their hand or massaging their hands and / or feet
 - Reminiscing and sharing your current thoughts and feelings can be a gift, even if your loved one can no longer respond
 - Making the hospital room more home-like by bringing in a favourite quilt or pillow, photos, or anything else that is meaningful
 - Attending to their soul and spiritual needs
 - Playing favourite music softly in the background
 - Taking your loved one out of the room for a change
 - Arranging visits with the family pet
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