



"Lighting the way with better patient care."

Anova
HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

Home Health • Hospice • Palliative • Home Care

HOSPICE PATIENT AND FAMILY EDUCATION AND TRAINING

FOOD AND FLUID ISSUES AT END OF LIFE

As death nears, the dying person may lose interest in food and drink. The ability to swallow becomes impaired. Loss of appetite and reduced intake are normal parts of dying. In the early stages of dying, the dying person may prefer only soft foods and liquids.

In the very last stages of life, however, they may not want any food or drink. In the last stages of dying, forcing food when the body says "no" may be harmful or painful to the dying person. Many dying persons will exhibit the "clenched jaw" sign as a way of saying "no." Forcing fluid may cause choking or the dying person may draw liquid into the lungs, making matters worse.

What is Nutrition and Hydration?

- Nutrition is the feeding of our body with foods and fluids.
- Hydration is giving liquids for the body.

What to report to the Hospice/Palliative Care Team?

Tell the team if the patient:

- Is unable to eat or drink
- Has trouble swallowing
- Has a dry mouth or tongue
- Loses more than five pounds in a week
- Has less urine
- Becomes confused or drowsy

What can be done?

The team will try to find a reason for the problem and discuss possible treatments. It is normal for the patient to have less appetite and drink less as the disease continues. Treatment choices will depend on your wishes and the patient's illness.

Things you can do:

- Encourage favorite foods and drinks
- Offer drinks or sips often – at least every two hours
- Clean the mouth often – a pleasant tasting mouth may make food taste better
- Help other family members and friends understand why eating and drinking may cause the patient to be uncomfortable
- Support the patient's decision not to eat or drink – if your loved one says "no," it is okay.
- Encourage the patient to rest before and after a meal
- If dentures do not fit well, consult a dentist
- Make mealtime a quiet and pleasant time – candles, flowers, soft music and good conversation all help

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- Offer small meals and use smaller dishes
- If nausea is a problem, serve small portions of salty (not sweet), dry foods, and clear liquids
- Wet the lips and mouth with a small amount of water, ice chips, or moistened sponge-tipped applicator
- Protect lips from dryness with a protective lip balm
- Continue to be a loving and caring presence
- Find other ways besides food and drink to show the patient you care. For example, offer the patient a massage or look through a picture album together.

It is hard for most people to respect the dying person’s lack of appetite. That’s because many of us equate food with caring. Family members may feel that withholding nutrition is cruel or neglectful – they are “killing” their loved one.

It is important to remember that as the physical body is dying, the vital organs are shutting down, and nourishment is not longer required to keep them functioning. This is the wisdom of dying body – it knows exactly what to do. This is not a painful experience for your loved one.