



Home Health & Hospice

Nutrition Therapy in Hospice Care







Hospice Care and Nutrition



We are surrounded by food. It is vital to our well-being since the day we were born.

We need food to keep us healthy, vibrant and strong; to keep us functioning, except in the end. At the end of our life, food is not a necessity. Our bodies do not need food as they shut down. In the end, food can actually do more harm than good. Eating food when our body no longer needs it can cause pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and anxiety. At the end of life, we eat for comfort and pleasure.

Eating for comfort and pleasure, what does that mean? It means it is okay to have ice cream for breakfast. It means having a piece of pie even if you are diabetic. It means allowing your loved one to eat only if they want to, not because it is time to. At the end of our life, we do not feel hunger or thirst. We are not starving even if all we had to eat is a piece of toast and some juice for the entire day. It is a natural process.

As your loved one's body begins to shut down, their





need for food lessens. Their body produces substances that suppress their appetite and takes away the hunger. As death nears, the body has more difficulty handling fluids. Their lack of appetite is a natural defense against taking too much fluid. Dehydration is a pleasant feeling to them – a comforting feeling.

As your loved one takes in less fluid, they will have less fluid in their lungs and in their throat, making it easier for them to breath. They will have less stomach stimulation, so they will have less nausea. Their body will increase their production of its own endorphins, which will result in less pain and more comfort. Your loved one may experience a dry mouth. Frequent oral care with mouth swabs and lip moisturizers will manage the discomfort.

As a caregiver, support your loved one as they approach the end of their life. Do not focus on the type or amount of food they are eating. Allow them to eat what they want, when they want so as not to cause more pain or discomfort.

Hold their hand, read to them or just be with them instead of trying to get them to eat. Our bodies know when it needs food and in the end, it doesn't. Allow your loved ones to eat as they are able and desire to. Remember food is for comfort and pleasure, not for healing.

Suggestions for Managing Nutrition



Related Symptoms

- Offer five to six small meals or snacks each day rather than the typical three meal pattern. Offer the food during times when the person's appetite is the best.
- Involve your loved one in meal planning as much as they are able to participate. Respect their food choices. Remember the last time you had the flu and what foods helped you feel better. A favorite food before illness may no longer taste the same or be as appealing as in the past.
- Offer small portions on smaller plates or cups to make eating less overwhelming.
- Strict dietary restrictions of salt and sugar may not be needed at this time. Allowing a more relaxed diet may help increase intake. Talk to the nurse and the dietitian for guidance.
- Using plastic spoons or forks for eating may help if the person complains of a metallic taste to food.
- If foods with strong smells (especially when cooking) cause nausea or poor intake, try eating room temperature or cold foods. They will have little or no smell and will be tolerated better.
- Meat is typically the first food group that people stop eating due to taste difference and decreased ability to chew. Milk, pudding, cottage cheese, cheese, yogurt, ice cream, beans and ground meats are also good sources of protein.
- Do not replace your loved ones favorite foods with nutritional supplements such as Ensure or Boost if they are still able to eat.

- If nutritional supplements are needed, instant breakfast or homemade malts and shakes are often preferred over commercial supplements (and cheaper).
- Don't be discouraged or show disappointment if your loved one doesn't feel like eating. Try again in a couple of hours.
- Let your loved one be in control of their eating. It usually is one of the few things that is left that they can control.
- If your loved one experiences difficulty with chewing or swallowing, please contact your hospice nurse or dietitian for assistance.
- Pureed foods can be frozen in plastic cups or dropped onto a cookie sheet in spoon size/mouth size portions and offered as one bite meals many times a day.
- Fruits (banana, blueberries, grapes and applesauce) can be cut into bite size/mouth size pieces, frozen and offered half an hour before meals to help with nausea or given every half hour throughout the day.

Dry Mouth

Your loved one may have a dry mouth. This may occur from medication, dehydration, results of radiation, or the disease process to name a few. Symptoms may be relieved by moist swabs, artificial saliva, misting with water or wet washcloth. Frozen popsicles or fruit juices may also be helpful.



What causes poor appetite or weight loss?

Symptoms like pain, nausea, constipation and shortness of breath take up a lot of energy and may take away the desire to eat and drink. Treatment for weight loss or force feeding the person does not improve your loved ones survival and may prolong the dying process and increase pain. It may also cause conflict between your loved one wishing not to eat and family members.

The Last Days of Life

During the last few days of life, your loved one will take in less food and fluid. Hunger and thirst are rare during this time and the body does not want or need food or fluids. The idea of withholding or withdrawing fluids can arouse strong emotions in family members as they struggle with the fears of dehydration. Dehydration may actually have some benefits for the terminally ill – it can be a natural analgesic. Allowing dehydration to occur at the very end of life is considered to be palliative and compassionate.

If your loved one is hungry, give small sips and bites as long as they are alert and able to swallow safely. If they are unable to swallow, wet mouth swabs or ice chips can be used to keep the mouth moist and lip balm can be used to moisten dry lips. When death is imminent, it is unkind to force foods or fluids. The only thing they need at this time is the love and comfort of family. To dying people, it doesn't matter how much they eat or drink as long as they are comfortable and are cared for and loved.

For additional copies of *Nutrition Therapy in Hospice Care* contact:
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